



"This is the happiest I've ever been." The thirteen year old boy said idly, as he spun the soccer ball in his hands in a rapid circle.

"So what, the rest of your life is going to suck?" The girl he was with said snidely.

The boy grinned, smiling widely at the scowling black haired girl.

"Nah. Every day is going to be better than the last."

The girl looked unimpressed.

"Life doesn't work out that way." She said. "I would know."

"You watch too much depressing anime."

She grimaced. "I told you.... I only read *manga* now..." She stressed the word manga with a slight Japanese accent. She had taken to doing such things as of late. At thirteen years old she was already dressing all in black, with wild red streaks that she dyed into her hair.. No one would look at her and think she grew up in Indiana.

"We watched an anime episode last night."

"You watched it, I was watching you watch it."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Yeah, well, I'm a girl. Get used to it."

"You are? Could have fooled me."

They bickered good naturedly for the rest of the walk home. They had spent the day playing soccer with some of the other local kids in their neighborhood. The girl, Sinistra, was quite good at sports, and occasionally she would juggle the soccer ball with her foot every time the boy would toss it over to her.

They came to a stop outside of Sinistra's large family home.

"I'll see you tomorrow." Sonata told him. "Don't die before I see you again."

She turned and made her way up the steps to her front door. The door opened before she reached it, and she stopped mid-step.

"And where were you all day?" The angry voice of a woman made its way all the way to the street as the boy quickly made his way back to his own home.

The boy's own parents greeted him warmly. His Mom had set aside an after game snack for him, and he sat at the table, chatting happily with them.

"Sinistra's really good at soccer, for a girl."

His Mother frowned.

"She's better than you are." She pointed out.

"Soccer isn't my thing." He said dismissively.

"It's not her thing either." Dad told him, laughing. "She's a musician and an artist, too."

"Yeah, she is."

"Don't let her slip away, American. A girl like that doesn't come around often."

The boy, American, scowled up at his father as his Mother giggled.

He did not die that day, so he met Sinistra as planned. As it was a weekday, the two of them met up at the bus stop the next day for school.

"Hey." She said, sounding bored as he approached.

"Hey." He said. "Did anything happen last night?"

Her face was stony.

"No." She said. "Nothing." She was lying. She always did, when asked of such things. But American knew her well enough that she appreciated the fact that he had even bothered to ask.

American let the matter drop, but he continued talking to her all throughout the trip to school. They didn't part ways until they had to go to their separate classes.

"Don't die." She told him, as she turned and bounced off.

"Until we see each other again." American said to himself, grinning. He turned and made his way to his homeroom class.

They had a great morning. His school friends were gushing about the upcoming festival, and he shared their excitement. Their teacher, Ms. Ignis, did little to deter their enthusiasm. Her smile was infectious, and soon enough she admitted to them all in the middle of their lesson that she was, in fact, just as excited as her students.

School was always fun, but the end of the day after getting home was always a highlight. Sinistra would come over from next door and the two of them would study, usually foreign languages that they weren't covering in school, and then play video games. Usually Sinistra would stay over for dinner, and then excuse herself to go home around seven.

"You should spend more time at her house." His Mother told him once. "And get to know her parents better."

They both knew it wasn't going to happen. American rather got the impression that his Mother was impressing on him that Sinistra's home life wasn't the best, and that he needed to look out for her.

On Fridays and Saturdays Sinistra was allowed to stay over, and that was the most fun of all. They spent their entire day exploring the countryside, and the evenings brought all sorts of strange misadventures. Their attempt at baking their own batch of cookies ended disastrously, with Sinistra somehow setting the dough on fire.

"I'm sorry, sorry!" She said, showing an unusual amount of panic, as she threw the pan into the sink and put the fire out with water. His parents had just laughed the incident off, but American had never seen her so embarrassed.

"She's good at a lot of things, but cooking isn't one of them." Dad told him, the night after it had happened. The pan they had been using had been completely destroyed, and none of them were sure how it had happened.

When she left for home that day, she looked unusually forlorn.

"Don't die." She said gloomily.

"You too."

She looked surprised for a moment, and then smiled. They stared at each other for a good couple of seconds, before going their separate ways.

"Tomorrow's the big day. Are you excited?" Dad asked him, over dinner. The festival had been all anyone had been talking about for quite some time.

"Yeah." American said. "Games, food, friends... what more could I want?"

"Family." His Dad reminded him.

"Family will always be waiting for me back home." American said, trying his best to sound sharp.

Dad laughed.

"Your Mother and I will be having fun as well." He said. "Maybe we'll see you and Sinistra there?"

"I have friends other than Sinistra..." American said crossly, as his Dad laughed again.

He went to bed early that night, and found that he wasn't able to sleep. He sat up all night dreaming of the festival. The lights, the crowds, the fun. It was going to be another wonderful memory.

He was snapped out of his thoughts by the sound of a rock against his window. He sat up, confused for a moment, as another rock slammed into his window.

He opened it, and the third rock hit his forehead.

"Ow!"

He rubbed his head as he stared down at the ground below. Sinistra was staring up at him.

"What was that for?" He asked angrily.

Sinistra didn't answer. It wasn't like her. American felt concerned.

"Is something the matter?" he asked, trying to ignore the pain as he leaned out the window. "You can talk to me about anything."

She raised her hand towards him. She beckoned him forward, with her finger.

"Let's run away." She said. "Just the two of us! Let's leave this place behind and-"

"What?"

She withdrew her hand. She looked gangly and awkward, more so than she had ever since they had first become friends. He rather had the impression that she had somehow hurt her feelings.

"I... can't stand this place..." She murmured. She turned her head away from him and gripped her arm. "This place... I... hate everything about it."

She shook her head wildly and looked back up at him. "But I won't leave you." She said. "Not now, not ever. Please...." She raised her hand again, but this time it was a lot more reluctant. As if she knew what was about to happen next.

"Why would I leave?" American asked blankly. "I love it here."

"This place isn't what it seems." Sinistra insisted. "Please, American.... I can't leave you..."

"Did something happen with your parents?" American asked. "Is that what this is about?"

"No!" She said, her voice sharp. "I don't have parents!"

"That's a terrible thing to say." He told her flatly.

She pulled her hand backward and turned away.

"Fine!" She snapped. "Don't... don't go to the Festival tomorrow!"

And then she was gone.

American stared after her. His previous good mood completely dashed out of concern for his friend. Whatever had happened must have been crushing for her. He would have to speak to her about it tomorrow.

All he would have to do was not die.

...

"Is Sinistra not going with you to the Festival?" His Mother asked him as she set some eggs on his plate.

"She will." American said. "She doesn't want us to go."

His mother sighed.

"That girl... She doesn't know how to treat a friend."

"I'm trying to teach her." American said. He said nothing more as he ate. His mother sat across from him, watching him. When he finished his meal he said goodbye to his parents and made his way to the typical meetup spot. If Sinistra had decided to make up with him and go, she would be waiting in this spot.

She never showed. He loitered around for a while. Longer, perhaps, than was wise. The Festival had already long started, and doubtless he was missed by his other friends. But concern for Sinistra kept him waiting for about an hour. He was conflicted: He had wanted to go to the Festival, but Sinistra's behavior troubled him.

He had no choice. He would have to go looking for her.

The center of town had had its roads blocked off in order for the event to take place in the streets themselves.

American walked forward, expecting to hear the sounds and excitement of the festival, but there was nothing. Rows and rows of empty stalls and untouched festival materials. American felt his heart go cold. Where was everyone?

He kept walking, becoming more and more unnerved by the complete lack of people. And then, suddenly, he heard it. An intense melody coming some distance away.

"Are you ready?" A voice cried out. It was so distant that American could barely make it out, but he could tell where it was coming from. He walked along the street, the noise getting louder and louder, and soon he could pick up intense cheering. He continued following the sounds until he reached the edge of a clearing in the small park at the edge of town.

A massive stage had been erected there, and it seemed that every person he knew was standing amongst the crowd in front of it. Thousands of people stood milling around, swinging off of tree branches, sitting on blankets, all facing towards the stage.

"Are you having fun yet?" A voice screamed from the stage. The entire crowd rumbled.

"This is the best show we've ever done." The woman on stage said, as she paced back and forth. The first thing American noticed was her black nylon stockings and heels. His eyes ran upward to her hips, her thin waist, her chest. It was not until he saw her face and that flaming red hair, he was appalled to realize that he was looking at Miss Ignis.

She kept on talking to the crowd, but American's mind was a complete blank. He couldn't tear his eyes away from her: He didn't pick up a lot of the words that Miss Ignis was shouting over the crowd.

"This town has given birth to a very unique young girl." Miss Ignis was saying, swaying back and forth. "A girl, I think, who has very strong feelings about this town and its people. Some of whom I have gotten to know very well over the past several years..."

She waved her hand, and a familiar bob of black and red hair slowly made her way up to the stage. American started: It was Sinistra

"Blow them away, love." Miss Ignis said, beaming, as adjusted the microphone stand to suit her height.

Sinistra wasn't in his class... he had never seen her and Miss Ignis speak in his life. Sinistra looked somewhat apprehensive as she adjusted the microphone and stared out after the crowd.

"I Burn...."

The sweet, melodious voice caught him completely off guard. His first impression was that it had to be pre-recorded, or autotuned or something. It was shockingly elegant, and very beautiful. It didn't feel like her at all. For some reason it made him feel uneasy.

"Consumed by flame..."

American jumped backward as intense fire burst forth on either side of him. He had never seen pyrotechnics in person and was taken aback by them. A part of him worried that it wasn't completely safe... after all, this was a small local show.

"I burn it all away...!"

The flames suddenly shot forward towards the crowd. They enveloped the high school kids standing in the front row, charring their skin black. Screams filled the air. The fire grew, consuming all in its path...

American screamed and backed away. The flames grew bright and hot, faster and more powerful than should have been possible. The flames spread through the crowd, seemingly catching every single person in the massive inferno. American turned and ran: He was at such a great distance that even the massive flames that were consuming the crowd of people behind him couldn't quite catch up. He had to get home... he had to find some place that would be safe from the fire.

"You must buuuuuurn!"

Sinistra's voice still rang out around him. It was beyond his comprehension: Blind panic had overtaken him so much that he didn't even properly register that she was still singing. He ran down the street. The concrete buildings and cars behind him were starting to melt. Despite the lack of flammable material, the flames were growing ever stronger. The park behind him had become a raging ball of inferno, almost like a miniature sun.

"Arise, Ignis!"

American stopped. The flames surrounded him from every direction, but he barely noticed them. The breath hitched in his throat, and he turned.

The ball of flame rose into the air. It hovered several feet off of the ground, and then began to condense. American had to avert his eyes: The light was blinding.

The sun-like flame shone even more brilliantly, and then a voice boomed out over the city.

"I claim you... Sinistra." It rumbled. And then it exploded, into a shower of sparks.

American raised his head, blinking wildly to try and recover from the blinding light, as the sparks descended onto the park below. They shone brilliantly, never losing their glow as they descended downward into the park.

The fire had died down completely. American saw no need to flee. He walked forward numbly, dreading what he would soon see.

Charred corpses lay sprawled out across the grass. Gnarled, burnt trees looked as if they were about to fall to pieces, and a thick, heavy smog covered the entire area. American had to stop himself from gagging as he approached the bright red light emanating from the stage.

It took him a while to realize it, but the stage itself was also completely unmarked. And there were still two people milling about on top of it.

"Excellent job." Miss Ignis beamed, as she put a hand on Sinistra's shoulder. "You're now one of us. Congratulations."

Sinistra said nothing. The glowing surrounding here was getting ever brighter. It seemed like she too was about to be enveloped by the flame.

"It won't be a quick, painless transformation." Ignis said kindly. "But the hard part is over. You did it."

"What did she do?" American asked.

Miss Ignis stopped. She looked up, and American had to stop himself from recoiling. There was no sign of a friendly, bubbly teacher there. The eyes were somehow cold and lifeless... a void of pure evil.

"American?" She asked, her voice sharp. "What- how did you-"

"American!" Sinistra said, sounding relieved, as she trotted towards him. "You're alive! You made it! I-"

Miss Ignis shot her an icy glare and Sinistra fell silent, stopping in place on the stage. Miss Ignis whirled back to him, her red hair billowing behind her like a wraith.

"What is the meaning of this?" She asked, her voice dangerous.

"How did you survive?"

American stared at her.

"You killed all of those people... didn't you?" He asked.

Miss Ignis straightened herself up. She stared down at him with an expression of great contempt.

"Obviously." She sneered. "Poor, stupid, American."

"Don't talk to him like that..." Sinistra said quietly, averting her eyes.

"I will kill you if you talk back to me again." Miss Ignis snapped. Sinistra's shirked away from her.

"Don't talk to her like that!" American snapped, much more forcefully than Sinistra had.

"Ooooooh, the boy has balls." Miss Ignis sneered, as she ran her hands over her chest, down to her stomach, and then to her hips.

"And eyes. But no brain."

She waved her hand to Sinistra.

"Kill him."

Sinistra stared up, eyes wide.

"What?"

"You heard me."

"But the ritual is over." Sinistra protested.

"Did you think that you would never kill again after the ritual was complete?" Miss Ignis asked scathingly. "He has seen too much. Kill him."

Sinistra stared down at him.

"But... I can't." She protested.

Miss Ignis stared intently at her.

"Do you want to die?"

"No!" Sinistra said quickly. "It's just..."

"Do it." Miss Ignis hissed. "With fire."

Sinistra took in a deep breath. American froze. It couldn't be... was she considering it?

BAM.

Miss Ignis recoiled. The blood spurted out of her head as she staggered backward, her arms outstretched. She grimaced slightly, rubbing her head as she pulled out the bullet that had embedded itself into her skull.

"Who dares...?"

Heavy footsteps came from behind him. Suddenly a man cut in front of him, handgun raised forward.

"Dad?" American asked, amazed.

"What are you doing to my son?" His father demanded. "Answer me!" He brandished the weapon threateningly. Miss Ignis glowered at him. The bullet that had slammed straight into head barely seemed to have affected her at all .

"You are just a man." She said dryly. "You haven't the power to frighten me." Her cloak began to billow around her, and the red hair on her head began flame.

"American."

His father thrust the gun into his hand.

"I'll hold them off for as long as possible. But for now you need to run."

"But-"

"Do it!" He barked. And American, more frightened of his father than his teacher, turned and ran.

"No you don't!" Miss Ignis roared, as she raised her hand. An intense wave of fire appeared within it. American's father roared with rage as he threw himself at her. The flame shot out towards him, and he swatted it away with his hand as he lunged for her. Without missing a beat Miss Ignis raised a clawed hand and tore out his throat.

Sinistra screamed, her hand over her mouth, as the corpse somehow lumbered forward out and threw itself at Ignis, limply wrapping its arms around her. She struggled briefly- his arms had wrapped around her in his last moments- but soon enough she had thrown him off. His body joining the mountain of burnt corpses around them.

The boy, however, was long gone.

"What...?"

Miss Ignis took off into the sky, flying high above the carnage. She whirled around, her eyes narrowed. She saw nothing.

"Unbelievable." She snarled, as she descended towards Sinistra. "Sinistra, if this comes back to haunt you remember that it was entirely your fault!"

Sinistra nodded, her eyes fixed on the place that American had disappeared. She said nothing as she was led off the stage.

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The woman in green stood on the air above the burning town. Her eyes flittered over the damage, mentally calculating the casualties. Perhaps as many as two thousand lives were sacrificed. Most of them children and families. The rest of the town either knew to stay away or were followers of Ignis.

Much of the rebuilding had already begun. Already the trees that had been burnt to a crisp had been replaced with brand new saplings that would grow in a matter of days to completely replace those that had been lost. In a matter of weeks it would look as if nothing had ever happened.

The girl touched down on the street and walked, her green cloak billowing wildly around her. Ordinary people didn't pay her any mind... they averted their eyes, if anything. But those with aligned with the Ignis... the real enemy.... Shot her smirks and knowing glances.

"A little late to the party, Windsor!" A teenage boy cried out from his convertible. The girl with him gave him a confused look as he laughed uproariously and slammed on the gas, speeding away. The woman he had called Windsor turned her head and watched them, a feeling of apprehension within her. If that girl married him and had his child... she would be dragged into the Ignis Coven without even knowing what she was getting into.

"Lost, little lady?"

The Windsor Witch turned to a man leering at her from outside a coffee shop, broom in hand. He appeared to have just been sweeping his doorway.

"Greetings." The woman said politely, as she turned to face him. She wrapped her cloak tightly around her to conceal her hands. "I'm an investigator from the-"

"I know who you are." The man rasped. "You're Windsor Eilonwy. You're the bitch who comes by asking too many questions."

"Ah." Eilonwy said. "Perhaps you would like to offer a statement as to what-"

The man spat at her feet and turned away.

"You trying to get me killed?" He muttered to himself, as he went back into his store and slammed the door behind him.

She should just conclude her investigation and leave. No one would even speak to her about what happened. Either out of fear or simple ignorance.

"My Father was killed!"

The words trailed across the wind and hit her ears. Eilonwy looked up, ears perked, and immediately the wind around her adjusted, carrying the sound to her. Not only did the sound become more audible, she could tell where exactly it was coming from by comparing it to the direction the wind was blowing. She took off, trotting down the road, her destination set.

"It was just a freak accident." A large, boorish boy sneered. "Stop pretending like it was anything else."

"No!" The boy, perhaps twelve or thirteen years old, screamed. "It was murder! Murder!"

"The police didn't find anything amiss in their investigation." Another boy noted. "You're making this up."

"I am not!"

Eilonwy leapt up onto the fence and stood precariously on the side of the railing as she looked down at the group of boys arguing. The boy, the one whose voice had hit her ears first, had his hand balled into a fist.

"You don't mean to fight us, do you?" The boy sneered. "You wanna die just like your old man?"

"Enough."

The boys pulled back, alarmed, as Eilonwy leapt up, her cloak billowing around her. She drifted through the air, far longer than should have been possible, before lightly touching down next to the boy.

"Wha-"

He pulled away from her, alarmed, but she placed a hand on his shoulder. She held him with a gentle grip, and smiled at him reassuringly.

"Who are you?" The boorish boy asked, regaining his composure.
"Some kind of witch?"

"Yes." Eilonwy said quietly. "Please leave us be. I must talk to this one alone."

The boys stared at them, as if wondering just what all of this meant. But eventually the Witch had her way.

"Let's go." The boorish boy said gruffly, as the gang slowly made their way some distance away.

"How scary." Eilonwy said, as they watched them go. "I do hope they don't come back. Let's take a walk some distance the other way... alright?"

The boy hesitated.

"I don't- I don't talk to strangers."

She smiled at him.

"My name is Windsor Eilonwy." She said softly. "Could you escort me sir?"

Despite being so much younger than her, he took her arm like a little gentleman and led her down the street. She followed him obediently, doing her best to subtly evaluate the boy.

He looked terrible. His eyes were red and puffy, and she was sure that he had spent nearly all of his time lately crying. She doubted that anyone could seriously look at this child and not see something was very wrong.

He led her to an abandoned arcade. She stared up at it.

"I remember when these things were all the rage." She said, surprised. "And I never found the time to play..."

The boy laughed. Eilonwy smiled encouragingly and nudged him forward. He led her to the boarded up door, adjusted the planks, and it swung open.

There was no power, so all of the machines sat in the dim light, looking extremely dusty and sad. Eilonwy amused herself for the

briefest of moments by looking at the titles of the machines, as the boy spoke.

"We used to come here all the time before it closed down." He said, his voice bitter. "They kept it open longer than most arcades... the owners really liked us..."

"I'm sure they did." Eilonwy said gently. Privately she wondered whether the owners were simply looking for young children to exploit. "Are you sure you would like to talk here?"

He let go of her arm and stepped away from her. She folded her arm back in her cloak and watched him carefully.

"I trust you." He said. "You're not like them. I can tell."

"Them?"

"The cult." He said, disparagingly. "The people who control this town."

Windsor Eilonwy considered him carefully. "How much do you know?"

"I saw it happen." He said hoarsely. "I saw it all. "

He rubbed his face with his sleeve. Eilonwy felt her heart melt. Eilonwy stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him, pressing his face into her chest.

"Please..." She said softly. "Don't cry..."

"Are you here to stop them?" He asked. "You're a witch, aren't you?"

"I can't be your hero." She said gently, as she stroked his back with her palm. "But... I believe you will not need one."

He looked up at her, teary eyed, and she smiled at him, wiping away a tear with her finger.

"Now." She said. "Tell me what happened."

He told her everything. How Sinistra had come to his house in the middle of the night to warn him to flee, how he had gone to the Festival. How his father had been burned alive by the flames. She

was a very good listener. She asked no questions until he was through with his story.

When he finished she allowed him time to gain control over himself. It had been very emotional for him.

"You are very fortunate to be alive." She said. "I daresay that if your Father hadn't sacrificed himself for you, you would have been killed as well."

He nodded, looking grim.

"What of your Mother? Does she live still?"

"I don't know." He said quietly. "She vanished...They had gone to the Festival together... I suppose she must have burned as well..."

"You're alone now?" Eilonwy asked sharply. "Who is looking after you?"

"No one." The boy said, his voice grim.

He fell silent, his eyes downcast. Eilonwy gave him a hard look. She was about to ask him more questions when he looked back up at her. She was alarmed at the intense fire in those eyes.

"Why is no one doing anything?" He exploded. "I called the police, firefighters... everyone. And no one cares... no one believes me."

Eilonwy stared down sympathetically at him. It made her think of how, hundreds of years ago, a little girl named Eilonwy felt the same way.

"These things happen everywhere, all the time. People simply do not care until it directly affects them or something they love."

She took note of his expression.

"I do not say this to upset you." She said. "But it is vital to understand this. The world will not change unless you make it change. No one is coming to save you."

"You think this will happen again?"

"I know it always will."

The boy stared at her. Instead of crying his face hardened.

"Good boy." She said affectionately. "For there to be peace... first, there must be war. Do you yourself wish to destroy your oppressors?"

"I do."

"Very well." Eilonwy said. "This is not a short or easy path you will take. But I know you will walk it well.""

"Why did this happen, Eilonwy?" He asked. "What purpose do these sacrifices serve?"

"Why?" A flicker of a shadow fell across her face.

"Ignis is a demon of great and terrible power." She said quietly. "Yet he does not exist on this mortal plane. He is reliant on his agents of chaos... his Witches... to commit heinous acts in his stead."

"Is that what Sinistra has become? A Witch?"

"She has indeed. She has sacrificed all of her ties to this world to better serve her master.. His unholy flames will burn away her flesh, and in its place she will be reborn as a monster."

"I think she's a monster already."

"You're quite right." Eilonwy said. "It takes an extremely warped personality to even consider such a thing."

"She was always so lonely..." American said quietly. "I was her only friend."

"People like that make for dangerous enemies, American." Eilonwy warned him.

They fell into a silence. American sat processing all of this information. Eilonwy stood in silence, her green cloak wrapped tightly around her.

"There's nothing for me here." American said. "I need to get stronger."

"Yes." Eilonwy said. "You best start today. Doubtless the Ignis are already planning on dealing with you. They have means to deal with

those who ask too many questions.”

“Will you... come with me?” American’s voice was hesitant. Eilonwy smiled at him sadly.

“I wish I could... but my place is here. Controlling the growth of the Ignis as best as I am able.”

“Will I ever see you again?”

“Perhaps.” Windsor said. “I too am an enemy of the Ignis. I will be my until my dying day.”

She turned for the door.

“It was a pleasure meeting you.” She said. “I trust that you will not stray from your path, until the bitter end.”

American watched her go, feeling a strong sense of trepidation within him. He felt almost resentful that she would simply just leave him like this, with no further advice or instructions. But the more he thought about it, the more he began to grasp that the only one who could possibly enact revenge on what the Ignis had done to him... was himself.

He stepped out into the street and the bright light from the sun was overwhelming. He squinted, covering his eye with his hand. He took the moment to think about what he wanted to do first. Windsor Eilonwy had been very specific: He could not hope to destroy the Ignis in his current state. The best thing to do was to get stronger, gather together allies, and exterminate them.

But how would he leave? And how would he feed himself? Where would he sleep? These questions and more plagued him as he made his way back to his parent’s house.

It, being out of the way, had been undamaged by the flames of the sacrifice. The house itself looked pristine and perfect, even though both of its owners were gone.

The door opened as he walked up to the door.

“Ah.”

A tall, imposing man dressed in a black suit stared down at him impassively. His black hair was slicked back, giving him a rather intimidating intense face.

"You are American... yes?"

American stopped.

"Who are you?" He demanded. "What are you doing in my house?"

"Forgive me." The man said. He spoke with a rather strong European accent. Of which country, American couldn't be sure. "I was looking for you."

"For me?"

"Yes." He said. "I am here to take you away."

American grimaced. "Take me? Take me where?"

The man raised a gloved hand.

"Your Mother sent me to find you." He said. "She's very worried about you, you know."

American shirked back, glowering up at him.

"My Mother?" He repeated. "You really expect me to believe that?"

"It's the truth." The man said.

"You're probably a witch." American sneered at him, his eyes narrowed. He knew better than to trust strangers.

"There are no such things as witches." The man said, his voice smooth. The lie had come so smoothly from his lips that a fool might have believed it to be true. "You are not in your right mind... you need help... After what happened to your father-" He reached out a hand to grab American's shoulder.

American stepped back fearfully, and in a moment of panic, drew the gun. The man's expression hardened.

"Don't be a fool." He hissed, as he stepped through the door. He was such a tall man that he had to bend over to fit through properly.

When he stepped through onto the front porch he towered over him, looking larger than life itself.

American raised the handgun and backed away. The woman next door who was tending to her garden looked up, and sensing that something was wrong, quietly gathered up her things and walked inside. She gently shut the door behind her, and the lock clicked.

American took another step back as the man advanced, towering over him.

"I'm warning you." American said, his voice cold. "One more step and I'll shoot."

"You are more trouble than I thought." The man said. "Children shouldn't play with guns."

"It's not a toy!" American said.

The man stepped forward, and raised his hand to rip the weapon out of his hand. American pulled the trigger, and the bullet shot forward. The man smirked, as the bullet impacted his head. At the moment of impact, American was sure the bullet would do no damage, just as it had done to Miss Ignis.

The head exploded. Brains and blood blew out from the back of his skull, spreading all over the pristine house. American stared, shocked, as the body of the man crumpled to the ground. He didn't move.

He stared at his gun, horrified.

He was in such shock that he barely noticed the screams around him. The people who had been watching through the windows of their houses, safely cut off from what was happening outside, had assumed that American would simply be taken away and that nothing would happen to them. An agent of Ignis being killed, however, meant that very soon that the Witches of Ignis would soon descend upon the neighborhood. They had thought nothing of the man who had come to take the small boy away against his will. If anything they felt he must have done something to deserve it. They were only concerned about their own well being.

The police, who had never done anything to stop the cult, were already on their way, sirens blazing. There would be severe consequences of the entire neighborhood for this, and no one wanted to be blamed for what would happen next.

American got a hold of himself with a shake of his head. He needed to leave now. He gripped the gun more tightly in his hand and staggered to the house. He stepped inside, grabbed the keys to his parent's car, and was out the door in a matter of seconds. He got into the driver's seat, slammed the door shut, and was out the driveway.

He had to adjust the seat to more easily reach the pedals due to his height, but once he was done he was off. Tearing off into the street like it was a video game.

He tore right past the cop cars coming from the other direction and they whirled around in the street to pursue him. American looked at the rearview mirror, frowned, and then swerved. A passerby car came to a screeching halt. The driver lowered the window to scream at him as he roared past.

American glowered in the rearview mirror. He had barely learned how to drive, let alone escaping cops. Flashing red and blue lights lined his sight as he drove.

He pulled out of town and hit the gas as hard as it would go, and the engine roared to life. The car sped up tremendously, and the police vehicles were not far behind. Doubtless more of them would be moving in to cut him off.

I don't know what to do!

He kept driving fast. Already the police cars were closing the distance. He was starting to panic. His adventure might end before it even began...

A light thump landed on the top of the vehicle. American jumped, looking wildly around as a familiar looking girl stepped onto the hood of the car and turned around to face him.

"You work quick." Eilonwy Windsor said, sounding amused. "I was wondering what had happened."

"Eilonwy!"

"I was worried that they would come after you." Eilonwy said, as she stood back up and faced the police cars, her cloak fluttering wildly in the breeze. American could make out a pair of very long pale legs, and had to force himself to pay attention to the road.

An intense gust of wind erupted up from around them. American screamed as the car was thrown up into the air, with Eilonwy still on top of it. They flew through the air, completely uncontrolled, the flashing red and blue lights becoming a memory behind them.

"Allow me to make you dinner." Eilonwy said conversationally. "As an apology for allowing this to happen..."

They touched down in the middle of the forest. The car rolled to a stop. Eilonwy stepped off the car and onto the grass as American followed her, looking dazed.

"What... was that?"

Eilonwy had already kneeled down on the grass and opened her cloak. Camping equipment, freshly prepared logs of firewood, and packaged food all sprang out of nowhere onto the ground in front of them.

"Magic." She said simply. "You knew I was a witch, did you not?"

"I did." American said cautiously, as he stepped up behind her.

"But... well... that was amazing."

"Why thank you." Eilonwy preened, as the wooden logs arranged themselves into a campfire, and the table unfolded itself some distance away. "What would you like for dinner?"

"I'd like to know more about you." American said. "You've saved me twice today."

"You're sweet." Eilonwy said amiably, not looking at him, as she checked her ingredients. "Does meatloaf and potatoes sound good to you?"

"It does." American said, without really considering it. "Eilonwy... who are you, exactly?"

She didn't answer, humming to herself silently, as the campfire lit itself and the potatoes starting cutting themselves of their own accord. Clearly, she wasn't going to answer any of his questions. At least, not the ones that concerned her directly.

That was easy enough to figure out, but American was never one to back down.

"You're very pretty."

"Why thank you."

"Why did you help me?"

"Because you needed help." She said, as if it was obvious. "I try to do everything I can for strangers... it helps make the world a better place."

The meat was searing itself on the open fire.

"We're not strangers." American said. "I was hoping we could be friends."

"Were you?" She asked, as two glasses of juice poured themselves out from a pitcher. "I suppose... I am not against the idea..."

"I'm thankful for everything you've done for me." American said, his voice quiet. "After everything that's happened... I have no one."

Eilonwy froze, and then turned her head to look at him. She gave him a small smile.

"Forgive me." She said. "This all must have been very hard for you... if it is any help of you at all... yes. I would very much like to be your friend."

They smiled at each other.

"Friends don't keep secrets from each other." American said. "Tell me, Eilonwy... who are you?"

Eilonwy sighed. "So that was your angle, huh....?" She said, pouting. It looked adorable. "I suppose you have a right to know."

"I do." American agreed.

"I'm not sure I should be the one to explain all of this to you..."

"Why?" American asked. Before Eilonwy could answer he quickly added: "We're friends, remember?"

Eilonwy laughed. It was a gentle, tinkling sound.

"Yes, I remember." She said. "American, I want to help you and see you succeed... but I am a Witch. I am, perhaps, not the best person for you to go to in order to confront Witches. You need to contact those like you, who have been victimized by the Ignis."

American stared at her. He felt his heart drop in his chest. He hadn't really thought about it before... but surely there were countless others who had suffered at the hands of the Ignis. Until now he had only thought of his own suffering.

"How powerful are the Ignis?" He asked. "How much of Indiana do they control?"

"No one entity controls the state, or the entire country for that matter." Eilonwy answered. "Minor conflicts arise between a number of powers... individual demons and the cults that worship them fight for control over individual towns and communities. Praetor Americana, the demon that represents the will of the American Government, cares very little who controls what, as long as all pay fealty to Him."

"Praetor Americana...?" American whispered. A slight tingling sensation ran down the back of his neck. "Is he the reason why the Government doesn't help us?"

"No." Windsor said. "No government can truly care for its people. It is impossible. By its very nature government can not be compassionate or consider the needs of the very few."

"They would just let us die?"

"Yes." Eilonwy said, her voice cool. "To them, you are cattle."

American gripped his hands into his fists. He stared at the green grass at his feet.

"Please." Eilonwy said gently. "You'll feel better after you get some food in your stomach."

For a meal that hadn't prepared itself by human hands, it was surprisingly delicious. Eilonwy sat and watched as American devoured everything that was put in front of him. She ate rather little in comparison. She beamed at him as he ate.

They finished up and the plates began to wash themselves. They sat outside the tent and talked, staring up at the sky.

"Won't the police find us?"

"No." Eilonwy said. "The campground is protected... see this sigil?" She pointed to the ground. Thin, brown lines had been etched into the ground at their feet. "It's a barrier. No animals or anyone unwelcome can enter this place. The campground becomes completely invisible."

"Did you draw it?"

"No, it erects itself automatically whenever I set up the campsite." She said. "Simply opening the bag did the trick..."

She showed him the small pouch that she had under her cloak. "A friend made it for me."

"Some friend." American said, impressed. "Much cooler than anything my friends have done lately." It was meant to be a joke, but it left a bitter taste in his own mouth. He looked away, embarrassed. Sensing an awkward moment, Eilonwy set the bag aside and brought him in for another hug.

"It doesn't get easier." She murmured. "Being betrayed by someone you care about... it's the worst."

"Has it happened to you too?" American asked. He tried to keep the happiness out of his voice.

"Of course." Eilonwy said. "It happens to everyone I think."

They sat like that for a while. American was beginning to wonder if he should feign being upset just a little bit longer than was necessary, but eventually he pushed away from her and grinned.

"So what's the game plan for tomorrow?"

"Well that depends on you." She said, surprised. "I can lead you to safety, but after that I must leave you."

"We'll have to meet up again." American interrupted. "Because we're friends."

Eilonwy smiled at him.

"Yes." She said. "Because we're friends."

There was only one cot in the tent, but Eilonwy told him that she often preferred sleeping out under the stars anyway. American found himself alone in the tent, comfortable and warm on the cot. But he found himself worrying about what would happen in the morning. The overwhelming nature of what lay in front of came down on him all at once, and he found himself crying to sleep.

He woke up feeling somewhat refreshed, with very recollection of the concerns and worries that had plagued him the night before. He got up, stretched, and walked out to find Windsor preparing breakfast. For the first time since he had met her, she wasn't wearing the bright green cloak. Instead she was dressed in a tight fitting black leotard. American stared.

"Good morning." Eilonwy said brightly. American returned the greeting, and sat down at the little table.

"We'll have to get you cleaned up." She said, as she cast him a look. "And a change of clothes. I have nothing for you to wear, unfortunately."

Do you? American asked himself, as he took in her legs. Eilonwy, upon noticing his staring, set the cloak on top of her knees to cover them.

"We'll have breakfast and then head to Bloomington."

"What's there?"

"It's where I live." She said cheerfully. "From there it should be easy to get you a bus ride to Indianapolis."

"Is it safe there?" American asked, his voice taking on a quiet tone. Eilonwy gave him a look.

"No where is safe." She told him flatly. "Not Ignis, not Bloomington, and certainly not Indianapolis. But to answer your question in more depth-"

The eggs and bacon that were cooking on the fire lifted upward and lowered themselves onto two plates. The first plate landed in front of him and they sat across from each other.

"Bloomington is a city controlled by the Noctis." She said.

"Is that another cult?"

"No." She denied. "The Ignis consider themselves Hellraisers... they obey no authority other than their master. The Noctis is a coalition of demons and monsters that work with humanity, rather than try to destroy it. So in Bloomington you have several different groups working together to control the city, rather than the absolute control that the Ignis enjoys."

"So it's better there than back home?"

"I certainly think so." Eilonwy said, smiling. "But some would disagree."

Eilonwy packed the campsite with her magic as American sat and watched. When all was said and done, only his parent's car remained sitting in the clearing.

"Hm." Eilonwy said, as she observed the vehicle. "You aren't old enough to drive, are you?"

"Uh, no."

"Hmm."

She stared at the car for a moment.

"I don't know how to drive either." She confessed. American stared at her.

"Really?"

"When you can fly you never really bother to learn." Eilonwy admitted. "Hm." She examined the car carefully, prodded it with her fingers, and then nodded to herself.

"I have no idea what we should do with it." She admitted. American placed his hands on top of his head. "I suppose... I could sacrifice it."

"Huh?"

"Demons will exchange material objects from the mortal ones with supernatural ones." She explained. "You don't need to sacrifice living beings to get something out of deals with demons..." Ignoring American's shocked expression, she raised her hand, and intense lines of line began to form themselves on the ground. "Cars aren't particularly valuable to demons, but we may be able to get something out of it."

"Welcome."

The deep, dark, intense voice seemed to almost reverberate throughout the forest. American gave a surprised start and pulled away... the noise frightened him. Eilonwy, unperturbed, raised her hand.

"I offer you this."

Thick white chains shot out from the portal and wrapped around the car and it was dragged into the portal.

There was an awkward silence.

"The Offering Has Some Value." The thing rumbled. Something began to rise up from the portal. American felt a burst of fear run through him.

The head of a dog poked through. It barked once, and Windsor bent down and picked it up. It was a small dog, perhaps the size of a beagle, but it did not resemble any breed that American had seen before. Its ears were oddly long and curved, and its mouth looked large and powerful. Its bright red fur looked to almost glow, rather like the embers of a dying flame, and the tip of its tail split off into a fork.

"What is it?" American breathed, as Eilonwy handed the dog to him.

"A Hellhound." Eilonwy said. "Your new best friend."

The dog nuzzled his chest, and American felt his heart melt.

"What's his name?"

"You haven't given him one yet." Eilonwy reminded him, smiling.

American hugged the dog close, and then set him down.

The dog spun around in a circle, chasing its own tail, and the grass surrounding it slightly caught on fire. American quickly stomped it out.

"Bad dog." He admonished, as he held it still. The dog whined.

"Yes, that's the way." Eilonwy encouraged. "He's a demon, so you'll need to be very firm with him, while he's still young."

"It's a boy, then?" American asked, as he stroked the dog's ears. He noticed, with some shock, that right behind them hidden just out of sight were two small horns.

"Yes." Eilonwy said. "And still a pup, at that. He has quite a lot of growing to do."

"How big is he going to get?" American asked, slightly concerned. The realities of owning his own pet... let alone a demon... were starting to dawn on him.

"Demons don't stop growing, like humans do." Windsor said. "He'll keep getting bigger and more powerful until he is killed." Upon noticing American's horrified expression, she elaborated. "But if you train him well he'll be able to adjust his size at will."

"If I train him well, huh...?" American whispered, as he stared down at the dog. "And how do I do that?"

"Simply feed him and be involved in his every day life." Windsor said. "That is far more than any demon would ever have done for him."

American immediately took some of the bacon left over from their breakfast and tossed it to the dog. The Hellhound munched on it hungrily, and stared up at him with wide eyes.

"Thank you." American said. "I'll do my best to take care of him."

"I know you will." Eilonwy said. "Now, we should be off."

Eilonwy wrapped her green cloak more tightly around her, and stalked off into the woods. American followed her, the dog yipping at his heels.

"If anyone asks you are my little brother."

"Little brother?" He asked, outraged. "You can't be serious?"

"I am."

"Come on, call yourself my girlfriend."

"No one would believe it." Eilonwy said.

"I would." American said firmly.

Eilonwy giggled, but then composed herself.

"Please understand." She said. "I like you very much-."

"Like me in what way?"

Eilonwy gave him an exasperated look, and the two of them broke out into giggles. The dog bounded ahead of them, yipping joyfully. American almost called him back, but instead told him. "Don't wander off too far!"

He turned back to Eilonwy. "Do you have any names in mind for our dog?"

"Hm." Eilonwy placed a hand on her chin. "How about... Dante?"

The dog stopped, barked, and then raced back to them, tail wagging. American stopped to give it a pat. It sneezed, and smoke began to rise up from its nostrils.

"This thing isn't like other dogs, is it?"

The hike to Bloomington was a nightmare. Although very athletic for his age American had never gone on such a long adventure before. Eilonwy chose to stay away from highways where patrolmen could easily see them. Whenever they saw a road they typically quickly crossed it and moved on.

"America is well on its way to becoming a police state, but nature always has a way of preserving freedom for all." Eilonwy said. As she was speaking a giant hawk snatched a baby bird out of a nest. "For some, more than others."

American had no idea what she was talking about. Although he feared being seen as ignorant, he asked her to elaborate.

"Well." She said. "It's like what you saw back in Ignis. The state and the Federal government are aware of the cult. They know about the sacrifices. How many people are killed. Sometimes for ritualistic sacrifice, sometimes for no reason at all. And yet they do nothing. At this point the local population should be rising up and doing something... instead they pretend as if it isn't really their problem."

"That's terrible."

"That is the reality they chose." Eilonwy said. "They chose comfort over liberty. And so the cycle continues."

"But there are people trying to do something." American argued.

"You... and me..."

"We're different." Eilonwy said quietly. "The two of us have suffered at the hands of this system. We can never again enter that world. A fact that you yourself realized when you chose to antagonize those who allowed this to happen."

"So what you're saying is..." American struggled to put it into words.

"In a way, they deserve everything that happens to them." Eilonwy said. Her voice was so ice cold that it rattled him.

There was an awkward silence after that. They met no one during their journey, a fact that struck American as odd. But he was sure that Eilonwy was deliberately keeping other people away from them. He even caught her muttering incantations to herself.

And then they arrived.

"Welcome to Bloomington." Eilonwy said. "Home."

"It looks just like Ignis." American said, as he looked at all of the normal houses dotting the landscape.

"Ignis goes to great lengths to keep up the illusion that it is a normal community." Eilonwy told him. American winced.

"Where are we headed first?"

"I think a hotel will suit you just fine for the night." She said. "And then I'll be off.."

American stared at her, appalled.

"You're leaving?"

"I'm afraid so." She said, nodding to herself. "I fear that I've done everything I can for you... now you'll have to make your way on your own."

American steeled himself, and then nodded.

"I'll miss you." He said. "Thank you... for everything."

"Your new best friend will be indispensable during your career, I imagine." Eilonwy said. "He will grow to be a fine companion. Oh... and... ah...."

She held out her hand. American stared at it.

"Give me your gun."

He stared. "What?"

"Please."

With great trepidation, he removed the gun from its holster and held it up to her. He winced as she grabbed it with her thumb and forefinger and held it upright. She examined it closely, almost as if she had never seriously looked at one before.

"As I thought..." She murmured. "This gun has been blessed."

"Blessed?" American repeated. "Like... by a priest, or...-"

"No, of course not." Eilonwy said, as she handed the gun back to him. "Your father died to protect you. His last act before he passed was to give you this gun to defend yourself."

"You mean he blessed it?"

"Not intentionally, no." Eilonwy said. "But he died to save you. He was thinking of you in his last moments, and those feelings have been left with this weapon... and those kinds of emotions are the bane of all demons." She tapped the barrel with her finger. "I think you will find that this gun is unusually potent against the denizens of hell and their servants. Particularly... the Ignis."

"That man I killed..." American murmured, as he stared at it. "His head just exploded..."

Eilonwy nodded. "It is likely he had strong ties to the Ignis. Regardless of what it was, your weapon eradicated him in a way it shouldn't have. Especially with your lack of formal training."

She touched his wrist:

"Never forget how much your Father loved you." She said. "That will be your greatest weapon on your journey."

American gritted his teeth and nodded, as he held the gun in his hand. "I won't forget. Not ever. No matter where I go or who I have to fight... I'll carry this with me forever."

He glanced behind her.

"You have to go, don't you?" He asked her. "You've walked me far enough."

Eilonwy nodded.

"It pains me to leave you now." She said quietly. "Are you sure that you can manage... on your own?"

American smirked. He placed his hand on Dante's head.

"I won't be alone for long." He said. "I'll find other people who hate the Ignis, and when I do... I'll be older and stronger. Next time, I'll protect you."

Eilonwy gave him a surprised look, and then smiled warmly.

"I'm looking forward to it." She said. "I wonder, American... what kind of man you are going to be."

She turned around and threw her cloak back. It billowed behind her. American caught one last look at the back of her legs and backside as she turned around to him with a smirk.

"We will see each other again." She said. "I promise."

And then she was gone.

..

Soleil took a deep breath. She raised her hands over her head, and leapt forward. Her hands gripped the bar, and she arched her back forward. She landed gingerly on the bar, and she straightened herself, her hands still poised.

"Blade!"

Soleil ignored the voice. She leapt upward, flipping through the air, before landing on her feet on the mat below.

"Yes?" She asked impertinently, before the man could call for her again. "Is it important?" She had already reached for her towel and was patting her face.

"I guess so." Diablo said. "Your Mother called."

Without a word Soleil allowed him to lead her to the room in the back. Diablo lit a cigar while she took the phone in her hands gingerly. She instinctively picked up the receiver and carried it as far away from him as possible.

"Yes...?"

She nodded absentmindedly.

"Yes, training's going well..."

Diablo let out a puff of smoke into the room. Soleil waved her hand to keep it away from her. A light breeze erupted from the edge of her fingertips. Her magically conjured blast of air was so weak the smoke didn't even move.

"I'm ready." Soleil said. "I'm READY."

She listened intently, her powerful fingers squeezing the phone.

"You cannot hold me back forever." Soleil said. "When I find her, I am ripping her heart out."

She hung up the phone.

"You shouldn't speak to your Mother like that." Diablo said. "You only get one."

Soleil looked somewhat ashamed.

"I do not take my Mother for granted, I assure you." She said. "I'm going back to my training."

She stepped back outside. Diablo finished his cigar and walked back to the desk. He picked up the report he had been reading and read the information within. He snuffed out the remains of his cigar on his ash tray.

A rattling noise came at the window. Diablo raised his hand, and an owl came soaring in. It transformed into a young woman in mid-air, and she landed on her heels right in front of his desk.

"Use the door like a normal person."

Minerva Knight grimaced. "I can turn into an owl! Why would I use the door?"

"Don't Owls only fly around at nighttime?"

"Not always." She argued. "I don't!"

Diablo lit another cigar.

"What do you want?"

The girl spun around on her high heels, showing off her black dress, her twin ponytails, and her stockings.

"First of all... how do I look?"

"The same as ever." Diablo said dryly.

"Second of all..." Minerva said, taking in a deep breath. "Someone is approaching the office."

"Someone?" Diablo echoed. "What do you mean, someone? A client... or an enemy?"

"Uh, a boy." She said. "Perhaps about... thirteen years old? He's been trying to find the location, and..."

Diablos stood up. He donned his brown coat and reached for his sawed off shotgun, which he kept neatly hidden within his coat.

"Show me."

Minerva transformed into an owl again and landed on his shoulder. Diablo adjusted himself, checked to make sure he was fully armed, and stepped out into the street.

There was no one there.

"Where is he, Minerva?"

"He's coming." Minerva said. She pointed her beak down the street, staring straight ahead. Diablos turned to look.

His first thought was that the boy looked like shit. Ragged, blood shot eyes. Messy brown hair falling across his face. Torn and destroyed clothes. He couldn't have been any older than Soleil, but he was armed... a handgun at his waist, and a Hellhound pup at his side.

The boy came to a stop some distance away from them.

"State your business." Diablo said.

"Hoo." Minerva said.

"Is this the Diablos Bounty Hunting Company?" The boy asked. "I've been looking for hours, but no one has been able to help me."

"More like no one wanted to help you." Diablo breathed, causing smoke to come out of his mouth. "Most people who meet with us don't live very long." He considered the boy more carefully. "Who are you?"

"The name's American." The boy said. "I came from Ignis..."

"Ahhhhhh." Diablo said slowly. "I was just reading about that incident. You're a survivor, huh? They hunting you down?"

"Yes." American admitted. "I had to dodge the police and their patrols on the way here..."

"No matter, you're safe now." The man said, as he turned to the old building. "Tell me everything you know about the incident."

American followed behind him as the owl leaned in and whispered into his ear:

"This boy can't be ordinary. How did he know to come here, of all places?"

"We'll find out." Diablo said grimly, as they stepped past the hallway. They could clearly see Soleil practicing her routine through the glass window, and American stopped mid step to watch.

"Eyes over here, kid." Diablos growled. Soleil's long, powerful legs were curved in mid-air. American reluctantly turned back around as they stepped into the office. Diablo sat down at his desk, and pulled out a cigarette. Minerva, in owl form, hopped off onto the perch she often napped on, letting out several hoots.

"Cool owl." American said conversationally. "It isn't a demon, is it?"

"Nah." Diablo said. "She's an annoying little girl." The owl turned to give him a reproachful glance. Diablo leaned back in his chair and set his feet on his desk. "First things first." He said. "You definitely came to the right place. I just got done reading the report on what happened..." He gestured in front of him. "And I was trying to decide what was to be done about it."

"You were going to go in and stop it?"

American leaned in eagerly, but Diablo shook his head.

"Unfortunately risking your life to save one town that has chosen to be occupied is impractical." He said. "We would be, simply put, liberating people who don't want to be saved. My priority, as a bounty hunter, would be to stop the spread of the Ignis into other regions. It's imperative to prevent the Ignis culture from spreading... Ignis can easily consume a thousand souls in less than opportune circumstances."

"So you're not going to do anything either?" American sounded bitter.

"I didn't say that." Diablo said patiently. "What I meant to say is that taking out the Ignis is going to be a nightmare. We're talking about a cult that is so deeply ingrained in that town that virtually everything is controlled by them. The schools, the local government... the streets themselves were designed to resemble Ignis' sigil, if seen from above."

American stared at him.

"I had no idea..." He murmured. He felt a sinking feeling in his chest. "Is there nothing that can be done?" He asked. "What about all of the normal people living there?"

"The best thing they can do for themselves is move away." He said. "It's going to take a full blown war to clear them out from the area."

American felt his energy come back to him.

"Then that's what I'll do." He said. "I'll go and fight them, and-"

"Get yourself killed?" The man asked. "I won't mock you... you made it here on your own, and I can tell you've killed before. And I know you must hate them for what they did to you. But you're nowhere near that level."

"I'm going to get stronger." American said. "And-"

"You can try." Diablo said, as he reached for another cigar. "But you might get yourself killed."

"There are worse things."

Diablo stared at him. And then he laughed.

"Alright." He said. He slammed the cigar on the table and stood up.

"If nothing else, we can definitely get you started."

Minerva leapt off of her perch and onto his shoulder as he made his way to the door and opened it back up. American followed him out onto the floor.

"Yo! Soleil!"

The blonde girl was in the middle of a leap. She somersaulted in mid-air, landed perfectly on the bar, and then posed.

"Yes?"

"Come down, I have someone I want you to meet."

Soleil turned to look at them, and then leapt down. She did a flip once and then landed on her feet. American smiled and stepped forward.

"Hey." He said. "I'm American. It's a pleasure to-"

"What is it?" Soleil cut in, ignoring him completely. She didn't even look his way.

Diablos lit a cigar. "This is a survivor from Ignis. Name's American Freeman."

"That Ignis?" Soleil said, her voice sharp. American nodded.

"My deepest condolences." She said, her voice sounding rather stoic.

"This must be very hard for you. Let it be known that we all do everything in our power to-"

"He wants to fight them himself."

"What?" She glared sharply at him. American smiled.

"It's true."

"You'll be killed." She said immediately. "You haven't... you haven't the slightest idea what you're up against, do you?"

"I know." American said, his voice heavy. "I need to get stronger."

She stared at him intently, and when he didn't back down she nodded.

"I understand." She said. "What must I do?"

"You're about his age." Diablos said. "I'm going to have to ask you to babysit him for a bit."

"What?" They both asked at the same time.

"We need to evaluate just what your fighting style should be."

Diablos said. "What you're good at. Magic, I think, is out of the question... you're already too old. But you're smart, and resourceful,

and determined. I think a Ranger or a Magitek would suit you just fine."

"Magitek?"

"That's what we call warriors who use machina... magical machines." Soleil explained, as she took a step closer to him. "Hmm..."

She grabbed his arm and felt it. American instinctively tried to flex. Diablos snorted.

"You're not going to impress her like that, kid." He said. "She's already stronger than most men."

"You're above average for a boy your age." Soleil told him, as she pulled away. "You're physically active and well fed... and quite determined, to boot. The main problem is a lack of formal training... But you're still young enough to start now."

"You could tell all that just by looking at me?"

She blinked at him. "Of course." She said coolly.

"When you've been in enough combat situations you can gauge how powerful someone is just by looking at him." Diablos explained. "And do more precise analyses through touch."

"You've been in combat before?" American asked her.

"Yes." Her answer came quickly, and she did not elaborate.

"At your age?"

"I don't think you need to hear her life story right now." Diablos cut in. "You need to get on a training program... today."

"Yes!" American said, standing at attention. Soleil nodded at him in approval.

"It won't be easy." She cautioned. "I won't go easy on you."

She turned around and walked back to the bar. She placed her hand on it, and it suddenly moved, sliding out of the way against the wall.

Soleil turned back around, and suddenly she was holding a sword.

"First." She said. "Let me show you just what I can do."

American gave Diablo a look.

"Go ahead." He said.

American took the gun, still in its holster, and set it down at his feet. He stepped onto the mat and faced her.

"You'll regret that." Diablo chortled.

"This is to assess my physical state, right?" American asked, not moving his eyes from Soleil. "Using a gun wouldn't do me any good."

"Well said." Soleil said. She looked pleased. Or at least, that's what he thought the shine in her eyes indicated. She tossed the sword at him and it went spinning through the air, landing at his feet. He scrambled to pick it up, turning his eyes slightly downward to do so.

As he had known she would, she came down on him in an instant. Her long, powerful leg crashed down onto his skull, sending him plowing into the floor.

"Never take your eyes away from your opponent." Soleil snapped, as she pressed her foot against his skull. American was shocked: The force on him was far greater than what a girl that size should have been able to exert. He struggled vainly, trying to free himself, as Diablo looked on, smoking wildly.

"She's a fighter, kid." He said. "People who learn to fight with magic from a young age can dish out more damage than those who don't. For people like us, it's an essential skill."

"You see why your lack of training is a problem, Freeman?" Soleil asked, keeping her foot planted firmly on his head. "You're a boy, but I have you easily overpowered."

"Your foot stinks!" American blurted out.

"What?"

Soleil focused attention on her own foot. "No, that can't-"

Diablo let a out a roaring laugh as American grabbed her standing leg. Soleil let out a soft 'meep!' and fell to the mat.

"You've already impressed me kid!" Diablo crowed, as American crawled to his feet, grinning sheepishly. Soleil ripped her foot out of his grip and got to her feet, scowling.

"It was a very nice kind of stink." American said innocently, as she retook her fighting position.

She lunged at him, grabbed his arm, and threw him up and over her head. He cried out in pain as he was slammed into the mat. Soleil again put him in the same lock, pressing her bare foot against his face-

"Soleil."

She stepped backward, her eyes glinting, as American sat up, rubbing his neck.

"That hurt." He said, as he shakily got to his feet.

"If that was too much for you, you should give up now." Soleil told him.

"As if." American said, as he took a step towards her, hands curled into fists. Soleil copied the movement, hands raised. When he lunged at her, she counter punched expertly, knocking him in the face so hard he fell to the floor.

"Careful, girl. You don't want to kill him."

American wiped the blood from his nose and tried to push himself off the mat. Soleil stared at him intently. Back home he had been considered a very good fighter... but he could clearly see he was outmatched. The girl was a monster.

She took her stance again as he staggered to his feet. He took a step forward, and then out of nowhere lunged forward with great ferocity. Again Soleil countered, and he staggered.

"That wasn't a bad feint." Diablos said, impressed, as American tried to recover. "But I don't think she'll fall for them."

American recovered his footing, and stared at her. She stared at him impassively.

"Had enough already?" She asked.

"Of you? Never."

They stared at each other for several seconds. Soleil sighed and lowered her hands.

"If we keep going like this, I might hurt you by accident." She said.

"You really have no idea what you're doing."

American opened his mouth to argue, but Soleil shook her head.

"Let's give you a couple of months of training and then we'll spar again."

Without waiting for an answer, she turned away from him and stepped off the mat. American stared after her.

"Wait."

She stopped and glanced back.

"I am going to be stronger... next time." He said cautiously. He was unsure of how she would react.

She looked at him. And then she was gone.

Diablo finished his cigar and came up from behind him. American stared up at the ceiling, feeling a sense of hopelessness well up within him.

"I got beat up by a girl." He said. "And I liked it."

Diablo grinned. "It happens to the best of us. But for what it was worth... for someone with no experience you didn't do half bad. You got in one good shot. If you knew how to turn that into a real opportunity, you could have done some real damage."

"I couldn't do a thing." American said quietly. "And she knew it."

"She knew that before you even started." Diablo told him. "She's not a normal girl... ten years from now she'll be the greatest vampire hunter in the world."

He grabbed American's shoulder and patted it. "Let's get you settled in, and then meet the others in the company... okay?"

American nodded at him, and smiled.

...

The nature of the Diablos Bounty Hunter Company led most of its members around the entire country, particularly the Midwest. Although the days, months, and years passed in what seemed to a blink of an eye American still was not entirely sure if he had met them all.

"This is Gearheart. He's our machinist."

The old, white haired man, palms greased in grime, enthusiastically shook American's hand. American took it with gusto, but when he pulled away it had turned completely black. He was trying to rub the grease away when the man introduced himself.

"Been working with Diablos for fifty years. Wanted to work on cars growing up... but then I fell into modding them with weapons. Next thing I know I get recruited to fight demons."

He showed them what he was working on... a giant shotgun with an extendable chainsaw attachment. "For close encounters." He said, grinning.

"Cool." American said, impressed. "When do I get one?"

They spent the rest of that day going over his measurements, his training, and his goals.

"The Ignis, huh?" Gearheart muttered. "The fuckers aren't to be trifled with. But you're definitely in luck."

He reached to the cape hanging on the wall and held it out to him. "Try this out."

American clasped it around his shoulders and immediately he could feel a strange, cooling sensation. It felt as if he was being submerged in cool water.

"That's a waterwraith cloak." Gearhart said. "Essentially for firefighting... try it on."

American gave him a look. "Uh, it is on."

"Nah." Gearhart said. "It isn't covering you completely yet."

American had no idea what he was talking about. He stood completely still, wondering what exactly he was meant to do as suddenly the feeling of being submerged washed all over him. The cloak, let a wave of water, crawled all of his body and covered it completely.

"Demon fire can burn pretty much anything, but you won't even feel it with that on." Gearheart said.

"Wouldn't that just boil me alive?" American asked.

Gearheart looked pleased that his new subject had asked such a question. "Nah. It doesn't work that way... science and magic don't always mix. The Water wraith will keep you cool, no matter what... as long as you're wearing it, that is."

"I'll never take it off." American promised.

"Yes you will." Gearhart growled. "That one isn't yours... I need to make your own."

They spent the remainder of their time together discussing possible methods of combatting the Ignis.

"Ignis is one of the Four Elemental Arch Fiends." He said. "It represents Fire, and as a result has an intense aversion to water... one of the reasons the Water Wraith will protect you so well against it is because of that. Water, to an Ignis Witch, is toxic. So what I think you should consider..."

He placed a large weapon on the counter. It looked to be a kind of rifle, but of a make and model that American had never seen before.

"A water gun." He finished. American stared at him.

"You have to be joking."

Gearheart smirked. "You think so?"

He took the Water Gun and raised it. He pointed it at a target he had set up some distance away, and fired. The blast of water shot out with the velocity of a bullet, and slammed into it.

"Those aren't kids toys." He explained, as he set the gun back down. "It's equipped with a dehumidifier, you see, that pulls water out of the air to constantly refill your tank. The Dehumidifer is enchanted to pull more water out of the air than would be naturally possible. It should be completely impossible to run out of water... you may have to give it a break to refill during intense encounters, but-"

"It's cool and all but is this really going to beat the Ignis?"

"Weren't you listening, boy? This thing already fires water like a bullet. To the Ignis, merely touching water is toxic... naw, getting hit by this bad boy is a death sentence for them. There's no tool I would recommend more."

By the time American left him to his work that day his head was spinning.

One of the odder members of the company was the African War Elephant, Colonel Jameson. An Elephant Beastman that was far larger than most of his kind, the company had to send out envoys to his home near the Indianapolis Zoo. American found himself constantly being tasked with this.

"Hello." His daughter Nora said brightly as she answered the door. Elephants, being so large, had to live in giant customized homes if they chose to live around people. "Can I get you anything to drink?"

"Uh, do you have anything for people?"

Nora giggled. "Of course, I-"

"You'll take what you're given!" Jameson snapped from the living room. Nora rolled her eyes.

"He's waiting for you in there." She said stiffly, as she stomped off towards her kitchen. American caught a glimpse of her reaching for a tea kettle with her trunk as he walked to the living room.

The colonel was fairly old, for an elephant. But his size and power was still overwhelming. He had spent his youth fighting demons in Africa, before the eradication of his people forced him and his

daughter to emigrate across the ocean, to the only place that would take them.

"Boy." he said, as American sat cross legged on the ground.
(Beastmen elephants don't prefer chairs) "You have a job for me?"

"Yeah." American said. "There's a Tiger running loose in the city."

The Elephant snorted.

"Give me a real challenge."

"You can come with me to Ignis when I go to take it back."

"Ha!" The Colonel stamped his foot. American knew him well enough by now to tell that in spite of his hardened front, he was quite fond of him. "Anything would be better than a mere tiger!"

"Your tea." Nora said quietly, as she set the cup besides him.

American thanked her and took a sip from it.

Soleil Blade was his constant companion, mostly due to her age and prior experience. Whenever Diablo wasn't available, it was typically her who guided him through his basic training. As she herself wasn't an active member of Diablos, hardly anyone was around Headquarters as often as she was.

"How'd you end up here, Soleil?"

She was up on the bar again, and American was thankful for the fact that he was now allowed to be within talking distance of her. Those long, powerful legs looked even better up close.

"I?" Soleil asked. "I'm looking for someone."

"Who?" American asked.

Soleil didn't answer. She looked troubled.

"I'm sorry." American said. "If it's a sensitive subject for you, I apologize."

Soleil split her legs in a parallel line, staying perfectly balanced as American stepped away, to where Diablo was standing in the corner.

"What's with her?" American asked quietly.

"I'm not sure that it's my place to say." Diablo said, as Soleil raised one hand and held her position.

American stared at Soleil unhappily. "I wish I could do something for her. She looks so unhappy, most of the time..."

"That's just her nature." Diablo said. "Don't take it so personally. She may not admit it, but she feels the same way about you."

Minerva soared upward and found a perch on the lights above.

"Persephone approaches!" She called down to Diablo.

"What?" American asked, bemused. "Peresphone- what?"

Before Diablo could answer, the lights dimmed. Soleil stopped what she was doing and looked upward, frowning.

"Persephone, you said never again..."

The lights clicked back on, and, to American's shock, every light on the floor was now shining on a young woman he hadn't seen before. She was dressed in a bright blue cape that seemed to flutter about her, and a bright blue top hat lay on top of her brown hair.

"Greetings, and welcome to the debut of Persephone Deadwood the-"

"Get down here and introduce yourself to the new guy." Diablo said. The lights seemed to grow brighter.

"That's an order." Diablo said.

The girl, Persephone, with a wide smile, stepped off of her makeshift stage and made her way towards him.

"It's a pleasure to meet you." She said brightly, as she reached out a gloved hand for him to take. Instead of a handshake, American took the hand and kissed it. She giggled.

"Ooooh, a gentleman, are we?" She crowed. "You can learn a thing or two from him, Diablo."

"American, this is Persephone Deadwood the Illusionist." Diablo said. "She's a show off."

"And not a real magician because she uses real magic!" Soleil called out. American had never heard her be so flippant.

"Don't listen to her." Persephone said smoothly, as she pulled her hand away from American's fingers. "Everything I do is just a trick. Do you like magicians, American?"

"I like you." American said, taking note of her warm brown eyes, her perfectly white teeth, and her tiny frame.

"You're such a flirt." She said. She looked up at Diablo. "This isn't your doing, is it Diablo?"

"Nah." Diablo said, as he puffed on his cigar. "He's always been like that."

The Hunters of Diablos often had dinner together, and Persephone joined them that evening. Minerva, in human form, glanced down sadly at her plate.

"Spaghetti?" She asked. She cast a look at Persephone. "What I wouldn't give for a rabbit... or a dove..."

Persephone pointed a finger right at her.

"Touch them and you DIE."

Minerva let out a strange birdlike noise and hid herself under the table. American stared.

"We don't always get along." Soleil told him, as she poured him his tea. He thanked her politely, and sipped from it as she sat down next to him.

"Where's Gear?" Diablos asked.

"He's getting some work done on my new weapon." American told him. "He wants it to pull water from the waterwraith cloak... it's like, the third fail safe he's thrown in to prevent it from running out of water..."

"Well you wouldn't want to run out of water against the Ignis." Diablo said. "That would be a death sentence for you." On the other side of the table Minerva and Persephone were still arguing.

"Hey, rabbits get old, right? You can give them to me when they're ready to retire!"

"Not on your life!" Persephone growled.

"How was LA, Pear?" Diablos asked, clearly trying to prevent a fight.

"The same as ever." She sighed, seemingly thankful for the change in subject. "Pure evil. I'm glad to home."

"Are you a professional magician, Persephone?" American asked her.

"For six months out of the year." She told him. "During the Winter seasons... the rest of the time I'm here, in Indiana."

"Why?"

"Persephone's role is to keep an eye on things in California." Diablo told him. "It's her job to keep her finger on the pulse on what's happening over there."

"Like what, who's dating who in Hollywood?"

"Ha." Persephone said dryly. "Funny."

"American's entertainment industry is a major cornerstone for the propaganda used to control the population." Diablo told him. "So it's really important for us to understand the mindset of the people putting it out into the public."

"Propaganda?" American repeated. "Like what?"

"Apathy. Selfishness. Degeneracy..."

"In short," Diablo cut in. "They're a big part of why most people are so complacent with the system. Why no one cares about what happened in Ignis."

American felt his throat go dry. He laid his fork down and placed his hand across his mouth. He felt like he was about to throw up. Persephone set down her own utensils and gave him a look.

"The fact that you're here and that you know about what these people have done speaks volumes about how their system doesn't work." She said. "You've been engrossed in it your entire life... so much so, that you barely noticed it. But the instant you realized that

it was happening, you felt disgusted with them, and rejected their messaging. There is hope for us all yet."

Soleil sat quietly, her eyes fixed squarely on American. Diablo ate his own meal quietly. Only Minerva seemed to be unaware of what was going on around her, as she had reached into a Persephone's discarded hat and pulled out a rather startled looking white rabbit.

...

"You're getting better." Soleil acknowledged, as he fell to the ground, gasping, clutching his aching arm. They had been crossing swords for about an hour, and Soleil had stomped him. "Take a break."

"Don't tell me what to do." He grimaced, as he tried taking his stance again.

"Rest." Soleil commanded, her voice firm. "You need to recover. You'll never defeat Ignis if you don't."

"But I-"

Soleil glared at him, and an intense force washed over him. He found himself falling to his knees. Soleil stared at him intently.

"Dammit..." Tears fell out of his face. "You can knock me down just by looking at me funny."

"That isn't true." Soleil denied. "It was just magic."

American didn't move. He was too ashamed to look her in the face.

"Cry if you want." Soleil said. "But we're done for the day."

She left him sitting there. American an intense wave of shame and panic... he was nowhere near where he needed to be.

He felt something nuzzle his hand.. He looked to the side, and saw his Hellhound, Dante, nuzzling him with his nose. He had already grown quite a lot.

"You're way stronger than I am." He said quietly, as he stroked the Hellhounds head.

In the other room, Persephone and Diablo were watching him quietly.

"What do you think?" Diablo asked her.

"Me?" She asked, surprised. "Why are you asking me?"

"You're the only one here who came from a normal background."

"Oh, is that all?" She took a sip of her tea as she watched American carefully. "I think he's being a little hard on himself. He's comparing himself to Soleil too much... he needs to spend more time with normal people his age."

"The last girl he was friends with torched his entire home town." Diablo said.

"And now he's trying to deal with the fact that he has to kill her." Persephone said, her voice grim. "That would be hard for anyone, I think..."

...

Sinistra opened her eyes.

"You are now a witch." English said warmly. "How do you feel?"

Sinistra sat up. She could feel the intense warmth running through her every pore... the great fire of Ignis that could consume the entire planet if left unchecked was now part of her. She raised a hand to her hair and felt it. The fine strands of hair had become pure flame.

"You'll have to learn to hide your new features." English said, as she surveyed her new appearance with approval. "It won't do if the Cattle realize you for what you are."

"If they do... they die." She rasped.

"Now, now." English chided. "We've spoken about this before. The cattle attend to the menial tasks that are beneath us. You must show discretion when interacting with them."

"I never will." Sinistra whispered. "That isn't why I became a witch." An intense pressure washed over. She flinched, shifting away from the other woman.

"Remember what I have taught you." English said quietly. "With freedom... comes responsibility."

Sinistra closed her eyes, took in a deep breath, and tried to calm herself down.

"Did... I make any mistakes during my ascension?" It bothered her that her memory of the event was so fuzzy.

"None that I am aware of. Your sacrifice was more than sufficient. The Master is pleased."

The Master... her heart beat wildly in her chest. It was the first time she had thought of Him after ascending. The fact that he was pleased with her made her feel strangely excitable.

"Does the Master wish anything of me?" She asked, trying to compose herself. "What did he say?"

English smiled at her. "The Master has very important matters for you to attend to."

Sinistra was taken aback. She hadn't been expecting this at all. "What?"

English smiled at her, and leaned in close. "Have fun."

Sinistra stared at her, and then broke out into giggles. She had almost forgotten why she had become a witch to begin with. Her parents were dead. She would no longer have to attend school. She would no longer have to worry about finding a good job and getting old. She was free.

An intense feeling of elation ran through her entire being. Fire burst from the strands of hair on her head as she shakily stood up. She had always been an active girl, and in good health, but she was shocked at how powerful she felt. It was almost overwhelming...

"Do not forget, that although you are free, your freedom must be exercised with wisdom." English said, as Sinistra's bare feet touched on the stone floor. "Although you cannot die of sickness or old age, you can still be killed in battle. You must not antagonize our enemies and especially not the Master."

Sinistra looked up at her. "I would never-"

"Forever is a long time." English cut in. She looked wistful for a moment, and then smiled. "You have the potential to become a great witch. I knew it from the moment I saw you. I daresay it could be you that leads us into Our New World."

Sinistra bent her head. The New World... the world that Ignis would bring about when summoned onto this plane. A world of fire and violence everlasting. A true return to the Age of Chaos, millions of years before!

"Yes..." She murmured, as her mind raced with wild images of everyone she had ever met throughout her life. "They all have to fucking die..."

"You must not underestimate the enemy." English warned her. "It is imperative you understand that humanity will not simply shrivel up and die. It will fight to the last man, if need be."

"I don't fear the Cattle."

"Then you are a fool. You must never underestimate your enemy, Sinistra. You must never forget that there was a time where you were scared and lonely, and would do anything to get back at those who would torment you. You became who you were today because you were once one of them."

Sinistra curled her lip.

"You speak as if I am doomed to remain among the cattle."

"You have only taken the first step." English said quietly. "As you are now, all you have done is broken free of your life among them. They can still destroy you, Sinistra."

Sinistra felt the breath hitch in her throat.

"You have taken that first step." English said. "Never forget how far you have come. But you also must know that the path to absolute freedom never ends."

She stood up. She took Sinistra's hand in her own and pulled her off the platform as well. Sinistra stumbled slightly- she was still not used

to her new body.

"Now." She said, her voice light and soft. "What do you want to do first?"

It was not long after that Sinistra stood facing the front door of her middle school. She stared up at it, her mind racing through all of her days here. The girls who would bully her, the boys who would call her a dyke, the teachers who would ignore her in favor of other, prettier girls...

She stared at it and the rage and hatred exploded out of her in an intense flame. Her entire body caught fire. Her hair, which was already concentrated flame, exploded upward into an intense inferno.

The school was consumed in a matter of moments. Flames exploded out of the building, shattering windows to pieces. The building shuddering, and collapsed among itself.

Screams filled the air. Mr. Rickert, the creepy old man who had been known to perv on students, abandoned a classroom of kids to leap out of the second story window of his classroom. Sinistra stared at him, and suddenly he himself caught on fire. He screamed in pain and agony as he hit the ground. He did not die right away: Sinistra wouldn't allow him to. She deliberately kept him alive as long as possible as the flames consumed his broken flesh and bones.

"Why was it not a quick death?" English asked her. Sinistra tightened her lip.

"He deserved to suffer more." She said. "I only wish I knew how to be more cruel..."

Screams filled the air inside the school as they watched the burning. A handful of people made their way out. Sinistra didn't recognize any of them, so she stayed completely still. The ones she wanted to hurt were the people she knew.

"it feels good, doesn't it?" English asked. Sinistra nodded.

They watched the flames climb higher into the sky. As more and more of the people who had tormented her all her life perished, she began to feel happier and happier.

"It's a shame my son couldn't be here with us tonight." English said.

Sinistra said nothing in response to this. She simply watched the flames and the little people running away in fear. She watched as a couple, a boy and a girl, walk through the door. The boy was leading the girl out by the hand. She felt her heart twinge with anger and jealousy as they stepped out onto the pavement, away from the flames.

"What is it?"

Sinistra did not know the answer right away.

She had spent her entire life longing for freedom, and now that she had it... she had no idea what to do first.

She curled her hand into a claw and held it out in front of her. It turned into a fireball as it soared through the air, and ended up breaking apart the boy and girl. She realized then that she was completely alone.

"I want a boyfriend." She said out loud. The boy and girl reached for each other again the moment the flames subsided, and her attention drifted upwards, to the sun.

She stared out at the setting sun. The unease she had felt ever since her awakening was now gone. She was free. She now knew what she wanted.

...

The fat man let out a guffaw as he snuffed out his cigar on the expensive jacket of his beautiful blonde secretary. She winced, trying not to let her discomfort show, as he twisted the ash deeper into the fabric.

"Ashley, I do believe this is the best idea I've ever had."

"You think so, sir?" She was paid too well not to agree with everything he said.

He waved his arm, sending ash spraying all over his desk. Once he left for the day, it would be her responsibility for her to clean up.

"Indeed." He said. "Kids these days have never even held a real gun. They grew up playing their video games and jumping on turtles."

She blinked. A giant handgun was in his hands and he fired, smoothly hitting the man shaped target on the wall opposite them.

"I'll be unstoppable in duels." He said, as he placed the still smoking gun on his desk. "If my opponent is younger."

"Of course, sir." She said, trying to hide her distaste. She hoped that his first opponent would kill him.

"I can save Indiana like this." He said happily, as he picked up his revolver and stared at it. "Imagine... the next time some college students heckle me in public, I can challenge them to a duel. They'll be running scared..."

The secretary, Ashley listened to his rambling with an empty expression. Doubtless he thought she was listening intently to his every word, but her thoughts were instead on how her life had ended up at this point.

"No one is going to be able to stop me from taking kids out of schools and putting 'em to work." The man said. "Too many lazy layabouts these days. When I was a kid I had to provide for my three brothers after my Father walked out on us. No one these days understands the value of good, hard, work."

The phone went off. The fat man leaned over and pressed a button on the dash. "What?"

"A young man has challenged you to a duel, sir."

The man smirked. "Send him up."

He leaned back in his chair and reloaded his gun.

"Probably here to argue about the box turtle habitat we're paving away for the winery." He said. "How keeping turtles from going extinct is going to make anyone money is beyond me, but anyway..."

The door opened. A young man, perhaps seventeen years of age, stepped into the room. The gun on his hip was the first thing that caught her eye. She felt her breath hitch in her throat.

"So." The Fat man said. "What do you want, kid?"

"I'm here to kill you." The Kid said.

The Fat Man looked at him, and then laughed.

"Oh, serious, are you?" He crowed. "Not a man whose dueled me has ever lived. Do you know that?"

"Yeah." The boy said. "So what?"

The man reached for his gun and checked it again, glancing at Ashley. "Girl, start recording."

Ashley nodded, and raised her cell phone. She opened the camera application, and then started recording.

"So tell me kid." The man said. "What's your name, and why are you here to see me today?"

"I'm American." The boy said.

"I know you are." The man stressed. "But what's your name?"

"I'm here to kill you." American said, as he tenderly stroked the revolver on his hip. "You've pissed off a lot of people, old man."

"You have a lot more grit than most kids your age for sure." The man said appreciatively, as he slowly got to his feet. "Everyone else would be walking outside my building, holding signs." He grinned.

"Joke's on them. I don't read."

American didn't laugh.

"Do you like westerns, boy?" The man asked. "Most kids are into those homosexual superhero films these days, but my generation... the last generation of real men... grew up on the western."

American placed his hand on his revolver as the fat man waddled in front of the desk, his own gun in hand.

"Yep." The fat man said. "The last wave of great American cinema... before everything went to shit." He raised the point of the gun to his nose. "Ten paces, and then we fire."

American nodded. The office was so large that they had no problem fighting in here. Ashley watched, with bated breath, as the man and boy met each other in the center of the room.

"Ten paces." The Fat man said again, as they turned. With guns in hand, the two of them stepped away from each other.

One Step

Two Steps

Three

Four

Ashley felt her breath hitch in her throat. Tears welled up in her eyes as she tried to keep the camera steady.

Five.

Six.

Seven

Eight

Ashley let out a cry when, on the ninth step, the fat man whirled around, raised his gun, and fired. The bullet swerved straight for American's head. He turned, his movement neatly dodging the shot, and then fired.

The fat man was blasted backward. Over the desk and into the glass window. The glass shattered upon impact and the man fell twenty stories to his death.

Ashley stared as American holstered the gun and turned back around.

"If you're going to upload that to Youtube, be sure to tag the Diablos Bounty Hunting Company."

He was gone before she could even blink.

...

"American!"

Seventeen year old American threw the strip of meat up into the air. Dante, now a sizable hellhound, leapt upward and snatched it out of the air. He was still chewing as the door to his room opened.

"Soleil's back." Minerva said. She looked a little bit flustered. Clearly she had just been woken up from her midday nap to inform everyone.

Dante stopped his chewing to give her a shocked look. Although he had never developed the ability to speak, he understood and respected verbal communication from anyone in the company.

"Really?" American asked, as he leapt off of the bed. "It's been what, seven months?"

"Something like that." Minerva said airily, as she gracefully leapt into the air, became an owl and neatly landed on his shoulder. "We should go greet her."

"You haven't spoken to her yet?" American asked, amused, as he held out his hand to Dante. The Hellhound obediently got to his feet and followed behind them.

"Of course not, the girl is scary." Minerva said. "I need you to protect me."

"From what?" American asked. "You're not a vampire." In the past four years Soleil had established herself as a particularly effective vampire hunter.

"I'm close enough." Minerva said defensively. "Plenty of vampires take on the forms of Owls, or use them as their personal symbol..."

American stepped down the stairs from the barracks of the Diablos Monster Bounty Hunting Company and entered the dining hall.

"You didn't seriously think she would be here, would you?" Minerva snickered. American walked through the room and into the next one, and then into the open training ground. As he had expected, seventeen year old Soliel Blade was standing on the middle of the

floor wearing a bright yellow dress, carrying the biggest greatsword he had ever seen.

"Do they make swords bigger than that?" American asked loudly.

Soleil turned to face him. The heap of iron swung around easily in her one hand, as if it weighed nothing at all. The sword, at six feet long and weighing perhaps two hundred and fifty pounds, was bigger than she was.

"Not to my knowledge." She told him. "Have you been keeping up on your training?"

He stepped up on the mat in front of her. "Have you?" Minerva leapt off of his shoulder and only the light above her. She settled down and stared down at them.

She let out an amused kind of sigh. "It is silly of you to ask." She said. She brandished the sword in front of her and pointed it at him. He drew the gun at his hip and pointed at her.

"A gun against me?" She asked, as she tightened her grip on the sword. American fired. The bullet shot forward, slamming into the tip of the giant blade. It bounced off harmlessly.

Soleil swung the giant back, and then dashed forward, her head bent. She swung the giant sword in a massive arc. American ducked, and the sheer speed and force of the wind as it passed by him rustled his hair. He raised the gun again, preparing another shot, but Soleil had spun around, her long powerful leg wheeling, and her foot slammed into his face.

He let out a cry as he was thrown backwards, off the mat and onto the wall. He slammed into the back wall with a thud and fell limp.

"I see that you still are not my equal." Soleil said, as she lowered her leg. She brought the sword back around and set it on the ground at her feet. "You thought that would work?"

American shook his head as he got to his feet.

"Nah. But I can't just back down if you ask me to fight."

"Admirable, I suppose." Soleil said. "But I suppose in a real fight Dante would have come to defend you."

Dante let out a deep bark. Minerva snickered.

"Dante's too scared to try that..."

Soleil ignored her. She took the sword and placed it against the satchel on her leg. It slid inside, and vanished into thin air.

"Where have you been, Soleil?" American asked, unable to admit to himself that he was still unable to sit up. "We thought something got you."

"I have been on the trail of the Princess of Darkness, Amaris Yew." Soleil said formally, as she stepped down off the mat. She held her hand out to him and he took it gratefully. She helped him up and allowed him to lean on her when his legs wobbled.

"Did you get her?"

"Not this time." Soleil said. "But I was close."

"Close doesn't cut it." American reminded her, as she led him back into Diablos' office. Minerva swooped past them onto her perch.

"What, you let her get away?"

"Yes." Soleil said. Upon seeing American's surprised expression she elaborately. "I had to save a boy's life."

American smirked at her. "A guy, huh?" He asked. "Your boyfriend?"

"No." Soleil denied. "He was just in the way."

"Who was he?" American asked. Before Soleil could answer Minerva raised her wings wide.

"Is our little American jealous?" She crowed.

"I'm just asking a question." American told her, exasperated. He had gotten used to Minerva's outbursts by now.

"A question about L-O-V-E?"

The door opened. Diablo looked in.

"What's all this in my office?" He asked. He noticed Soleil and closed the door behind him. "Ah, Blade. I got your report. We have been expecting you."

"You knew she was coming back and you didn't tell me?" American asked.

"I didn't think you wanted to know."

"Of course I do." American said. "What's going to happen if she needs me?"

Soleil shot him a sharp, surprised look.

"I think she can take care of herself." Diablo said. "Soleil, I think I have something you might want to see..."

Soleil nodded, her expression stony, as she stepped into the office. The door shut behind them.

...

Seventeen year old Sinistra stared out over the city of Ignis. The parts she had burned four years ago had long been cleared away, and rebuilt into new homes. Brand new families were beginning to move into the old neighborhoods. Although she had been specifically asked not to do so, she had taken the opportunity to take a look at her old home.

She had burnt the one she had grown up in the day she had become a witch, killing both of her parents.. Today an identical one stood in its place. She now knew that the local construction companies kept a constant stream of business going by simply reconstructing homes that had already been completely destroyed. Even if she dedicated herself to destroying the house every time it was rebuilt, it would simply come back in a year. Doing so was pointless.

She watched as the little girl who lived in that house stepped out, waved to her parents with a smile, and skipped down the street. She went some distance away, walking down the sidewalk, and stopped to chat with an old lady. The lady, Sinistra recalled, had been living there long before she had been born. She knew perfectly well about

the Ignis and how the town was dangerous, but not a shadow of that passed her face as she chatted happily with the little girl about her new home.

Sinistra felt a burning anger inside of her. That woman had never said a kind word to her in her life. She began to lower herself out from her position in the air to touch down onto the ground below. She stepped forward like any other pedestrian.

She met no one as she approached the old lady and the girl. Her red eyes glinted with an evil intent as she walked towards them. The old lady did not notice her, at first. Doubtless she had been around the Ignis so long that she barely noticed them. But the little girl did. She stopped, the smile fading from her face, as their eyes met.

Children had an innate fear and hatred for the supernatural, that dulled as they aged. It took several moments for the old woman to realize that something was wrong.

"Oh..." She turned and looked at her and frowned, the wheels turning in her head. "You... are...?" It seemed to dawn on her just who she was looking at, and was already backing away somewhat slightly. Sinistra raised a long, pointed finger to her old home.

"Do you know the story behind that house?" She rasped. Her voice had changed. It was cold and evil, her inner contempt for all those around her reverberated in each word. The girl shook her head.

"Four years ago, there was a lonely little girl who lived in that house. The world had wronged her. All those around her lived their lives in ignorance of the suffering she went through every day."

The girl stared at her, enraptured, as she continued speaking.

"The girl hated them." Sinistra said, her voice containing every ounce of her hatred and rage. "All her life she wished it would all just disappear. And then one day..."

The house burst into flames. The little girl jumped, turning around horrified, as Sinistra leered down at her, her hair covered in flames.

"Her wish came true." The girl caught one last final look at Sinistra as she vanished on the spot. The girl screamed, tears welling up in her face as the old woman quickly wrapped her arm around her and led her inside.

Sinistra had already returned to her post like nothing had happened. Her eyes followed the flames as they consumed the house. Not too long before she had just been thinking about how it was pointless to keep burning it down, but now that she was actually watching it happen she felt differently.

She wanted to do it. Over and over. If she had to do it every year for the rest of her eternity on Earth.... Then so be it.

...

Twenty year old American let out a yawn as he strode through the streets of Indianapolis. Decked out in full armor and gun at his waist, the man cut quite the intimidating figure. Police Officers, who spent their time beating the powerless and raping women rather than protecting people, tried to avoid eye contact as he passed. In his hand he carried a bag containing the head of the Medusa he had just slaughtered. He kept his hand clenched firmly on the bag as he made his way back to the Diablos Bounty Hunting Company.

"I'm back." He called, as he stepped through the front door. Minerva let out a cry as she raised her wings.

"Did you-"

She transformed back into human form and took the bag from him. She cracked it open, and immediately peered inside. Instantly she turned to stone.

"Dumbass." American said. He pulled out a vial of green liquid and poured it on her head. The stone began to crack, and Minerva burst out, shaking her head wildly. "What'd you do that for?"

"I am an owl." Minerva said, as if that explained everything. "Hi, Diablo!"

Diablo stepped into the room. "Ah, you're back." He said. "Did you get the target?"

American waved the bag in front of his head. "Here's the proof. Just a moment ago I had a stone statue of Minerva to prove it."

"Excellent." Diablo said. He opened the bag and peered into it. Unlike Minerva, he was not affected by its stone gaze. "That's her, all right. You'll be paid the bounty... about a hundred and fifty."

"A hundred and fifty?" American exploded. "After all the trouble she gave me?"

"She only had one known victim." Diablo explained, as he sealed the bag shut again. "She probably had more, but if you can't prove it-"

"Ugh."

"That's Bounty hunting for ya." Minerva said. "The real money is being a lapdog for the state."

"Like being a cop?" American sneered.

"There's a reason why most people don't go into our field." Diablo said. "A significant portion of the population can't even use magic, and those few that can will never be able to reach the level necessary to go after the real money... The Amaris Yews of the world, and such."

"How much is Amaris Yew worth, anyway?"

"About a billion."

American spluttered.

"We're talking about one of the most dangerous women in the world." Diablo said. "She has the capacity to lead the Noctis to control all of humanity-"

"What is this about Amaris Yew?"

Soleil entered the room. She had always been a rather pretty girl, but at twenty she had become stunning. Her bright blue eyes shone brightly on her unsmiling face. She looked intense.

"We're talking bounties." Diablos explained. Soleil nodded sagely.

"Ah." She said. "Yes, Amaris Yew has a several hundred year long history of crimes against humanity. She has enemies all over the world. I would say that a mere billion is too low, personally."

"Is that why you're hunting her down?" American asked. "For the money?"

Soleil looked offended. "Of course not." She said. "My family has been hunting Amaris Yew for generations."

"That reminds me." Diablo said. "I have something for you, American."

American turned. Diablos placed a file on the desk in front of him. His heart stopped.

Ignis Sinistra.

"Your old girlfriend has a bounty of her own now." Diablo said, as he lit a cigar. American took the file in his hand and picked it up. The photograph on the cover was an old one. Sinistra stood off to the side, staring into the distance with a vacant expression. He remembered that day well. He had been the one to take the photo.

He took no notice of her stated bounty and instead ran his eyes over her information. Out of nowhere, he began to read out loud.

"Ignis Sinistra is known to target specific targets around her home town of Ignis, Indiana. These targets, including her old schools and the location in which her childhood home once stood, keep getting burned down again and again. Taking hundreds of lives..."

He looked up, frowning. "Why would she do that?"

"Lingering feelings of antagonism, no doubt." Diablos said. "She hated those places more than anything. Now that she has power over them, she'll keep destroying them just because she can."

American stared down at the file.

"I can't believe she would be that angry." He said quietly. "I still can't believe..." He trailed off, his memories leading back to the day when she chose to sacrifice thousands of people.

"I need to stop her."

Diablo stared at him impassively as American squeezed his hand into a fist.

"She's still killing people. She's a monster."

"You think you can hunt down an Ignis Witch?" Diablo asked. "A follower of one of the Four Elemental Archfiends?"

"I have to." American said, with conviction.

"American." Soleil's voice was surprisingly gentle. American turned to look at her. She did not smile at him, but there was a strange warmth radiating from her regardless. "She is not worth it."

American opened his mouth to reprimand her, but closed it again just as quickly. He stared at her tight lipped for a moment before answering.

"What are you saying?" American asked quietly.

"She is an Ignis Witch who is destroying the Cattle who choose to live under her Master's Rule." Soleil answered. "They allowed this to happen, and they need to reap the rewards"

"My Father didn't choose to be killed." American said coldly.

"I think what Soleil means to say is that the people have not risen up to liberate themselves." Diablo cut in. "It would be very easy for Americana to stamp out the Ignis... If he had the support of the locals. But he does not. "

"You may have become a Bounty Hunter to liberate Ignis." Soleil said. "But if the people don't want to be liberated... you will find yourself fighting for nothing. A people that don't want or deserve freedom are not worth dying for."

American turned away from them both. His eye was on the door.

"You sound like you don't want me to go fight them."

"I don't." Soleil said bluntly

American did not answer her. He opened the door and stepped outside. Soleil watched him go. Her expression was stoic, but Diablo

knew her well enough to tell that she was upset.

"You knew it would someday come to this."

She gave a curt nod.

"Yes, but not so soon." She said. "He's not ready. He's too young."

"He's only ten months your junior." Diablos pointed out. Soleil's cheeks turned a light shade of pink.

"American's not the only dummy in the building." Minerva said loudly, as she strut about on Diablo's desk, gashing holes in the wood with her talons.

Soleil gave her an icy look. "He's so immature. I always think of him as being much younger than I..."

"He's like a little brother to you." Minerva snickered.

Soleil did not respond to this. Instead she was staring forlornly at the door.

"I know what he is going through..." she said quietly. "But why can I not make him understand?"

"Most people aren't like you, Soleil." Diablo said, as he placed a hand on her shoulder. "A part of him is still grasping to understand that some people simply shouldn't be saved."

Soleil did not respond to this either. Instead she simply stared at the door in silence.

...

Diablo found American waiting for him in his office. He didn't say anything as he crossed the room and sat behind his desk.

"What do you think?" American asked him immediately, after he had sat down. "Why does Soleil think I can't do it?"

"If I had to guess..." Diablos tapped the cigar with his finger. "She thinks you don't have strong enough conviction in what you intend to do."

"What?" American glared at him. "Of course I do... after everything I've done, I-"

"When push came to shove you faltered." Diablo said. "You haven't learned to be your own man yet. When we warned you of the dangers of confronting the Ignis head on, you were adamant that it was what you wanted to do. But it did not take much pressure from Soleil to get you to re-consider."

"You're saying I'm weak?"

"I'm saying you're too indecisive." Diablo stressed. "You need real conviction if you're going to stand up to your old girlfriend."

American's eyes flashed.

"I am going to destroy Sinistra!" American snapped, his voice angry. "Do you doubt I can do it?"

Diablo gave him a cold look. "You still think of her as your friend." He said slowly. "Don't you?"

American froze.

"I... that's what she was." He admitted. "But I don't-"

"On some level you still care for her." Diablo said. "Too much, for someone who plans on killing her."

American turned his head away. He didn't want to admit it, but it was true. It was difficult to think of Sinistra as anything other than the girl he had grown with. It almost felt like Sinistra the girl and Sinistra the Ignis Witch were two completely different people.

"I see that we have stumbled upon the root of the problem." Diablo said. "You want to hate her. You want to destroy her, and those who enabled her to become what she is now. But in your heart, you cannot. You cannot separate the Hunter from your humanity."

"She destroyed my life." American rasped. He placed his hands on Diablos' desk and stared at him. "Why can't I hate her?"

"I can't answer that question for you." Diablo said quietly.

American glanced downward at the desk. He thought for a moment, and then he began to speak:

"A part of me wants to think this is all a big mistake." He murmured. "Perhaps Sinistra wasn't responsible for her actions. She was coerced by the cult to join them. Not because she wanted to, but because she felt like she had to."

Diablo did not offer his opinion. He merely sat and listened, still smoking his cigar.

"A part of me... wants us to be friends again." American said quietly. "Even after what she did."

Diablo took the cigar out of his mouth and snuffed it out on his desk.

"What will you do now?"

American closed his eyes.

"I need to see her again." He said. "I must convince myself that she is a person that needs to be destroyed. I cannot allow there to be room for doubt. I must eliminate this image of her I have in my mind: She is no longer my friend. She is now my enemy."

"It sounds as if you're having second thoughts about what you intend to do." Diablos said quietly. "No one is forcing you to go back. If it truly means more to you to forgive her than to take revenge, you should."

"Forgive?" American asked quietly. "After what she did?"

He looked down at his clenched fists. "I need to destroy her." He whispered. "It's what I want."

Diablo flicked the cigar at him. The butt hit his head, and American gave a small start of surprise as the extinguished cigar landed on the desk in front of him.

"You can't have it both ways, kid." Diablo said. "Either you fight, or you stay where you are."

He stood up. He turned to the files on the shelf behind him and reached for one.

"Seven years ago." Diablos said. "Ignis Sinistra killed five thousand people. Those who were aware of the Cult of Ignis and their practitioners were not among them. They knew to stay away. Every single person burned in that blaze was innocent of any association with the Ignis."

American said nothing.

"Many people lost their families." Diablo continued. "Many were taken in by the cult, and have helped to continue the cycle of violence. There are those among them, like Sinistra, that are grateful for the opportunity. They hated their families and their loved ones, and enjoy the lifestyle of endless excitement that the Ignis offer them."

American did not move.

"All crime is legal." Diablo went on. "Murders, rapes, and robberies do not get investigated by the police. In fact, usually the police have no responsibilities at all, other than preventing outsiders from disturbing Ignis activity. New families are encouraged to move in due to affordable housing and high paying jobs..."

American seized up.

"And these families are the core target for the cult's sacrifices." Diablo said. "Doubtless, your parents fell into the same trap, or worse--"

"Shut up." American whispered.

"Were Ignis worshippers themselves." Diablos finished. American raised his fist and punched the desk. The thick, wooden mahogany desk split in half upon impact.

"The bounty you just pulled won't even pay for half of what that desk was worth." Diablo told him. "I hope you're able to pay it off."

American stared at him.

"I should break you in two as well."

"Is that a threat?" Diablo asked, in a bored voice. "It's true. Your parents were either evil Ignis worshippers themselves or idiots who

thought they could take advantage of the cheap housing."

"My father died to save me!"

"If he did his due diligence, he never would have put you in that situation."

American went for his gun. Diablo got his first.

BANG!"

American's gun went spinning out of his hand. He grimaced, gripping his wrist as he stared hatefully at Diablo.

"You would be dead now, if I wished it." Diablo told him. "I just showed you more mercy than Sinistra showed your parents."

"You-"

Diablo fired again. The bullet grazed past his cheek, leaving a thin trail of blood.

"Do you really intend to show more mercy to your enemies than to your own friends?" Diablo demanded. "You come here, to my business, and ask me to help you destroy this witch. And when it comes time for you to commit yourself to your goal... you shy away from it. You wasted my time for a dream that you did not truly intend to fulfill. Tell me truly... do you truly have the conviction to kill Sinistra?"

American straightened himself.

"I do not."

"Then what do you intend to do?"

A shadow fell across American's face. "I don't know."

Diablo glared at him.

"Get out of my office." He said. "And I'll send you the bill for the desk."

American grabbed his gun, holstered it, and made his way to the door. He tried not to hold his bleeding hand.

"Keep your blood off the door." Diablo said, as American slammed the door shut behind him.

Soleil was standing out in the hallway. "What happened?" She asked.

"Nothing." American said shortly, as he tried to push past her. Soleil cut him off, and grabbed his wrist. He froze. The overwhelming power of Soleil always took him aback.

"That was not nothing." She said, as she squeezed his arm tighter. "What happened?"

American glanced downward.

"I'm not sure I'll be able to bring myself to kill Sinistra." He said quietly. "And Diablo got upset with me for it."

Soleil pulled him closer to her, and then released his wrist. They stood staring at each other, face to face.

"Killing to him comes as naturally as breathing." She said dismissively. "You shouldn't listen to him, American. The fact that you still care about her is only human."

"But I don't want to feel this way." American told her. "I want to stop her-"

Soleil glanced down. "You're bleeding." She said immediately. She raised her free hand and a roll of bandages leapt out of her satchel and into her hand. It unwound itself and began to snake its way around American's arm.

"Hey, you don't need to-"

"Shhhhh." Soleil said quietly. "Don't move."

She released her hand from his and stood there, staring at him, as the bandage wrapped itself around his arm. She was using her magic to move the bandage about without touching it. American knew that Soleil had a reputation for not being particularly good at magic, but he was surprised at how neatly the wrap moved around his fingers.

Soleil reached out a hand, and tore off the end of the bandage. She did the finishing touches by hand.

"I hope that's alright." She said.

American looked at her. There was a softness in her expression that he had never seen before.

"Soleil."

She looked at him. Her eyes were a bright, brilliant blue.

"How do I kill another person?"

Her expression hardened.

"Witches aren't people."

She spoke with such conviction that American was taken aback by it.

"That's right." He said slowly. "She isn't human anymore...."

"You must kill her." Soleil reminded him. "It's what you want. It's what she deserves. I'm sure somehow, someday, you'll find a way and-"

"Wait."

Soleil fell silent.

"I can't do it alone Soleil." American said quietly.

She lowered her hand and stared at him rather intently.

"I want the people to rise up and destroy the Ignis." American said.

"I want to bring together a group of people who will fight to liberate the city... and then build a new one in its place. Simply killing Sinistra won't be enough. The culture itself has to change. You said it yourself, didn't you? The people themselves need to want change."

Soleil looked at him rather intently.

"So you want to consider yourself a revolutionary..." She said quietly.

"How very fitting, American Freeman." She smiled at him. "Yes... A Shepard that can lead the people to their own salvation... that is what the people need. Not someone who simply kills indiscriminately

or seeks petty vengeance. The people need to save themselves... but they need a leader. They need inspiration."

"And I need you."

Soleil stopped. She stared at him, her breath hitched in her throat.

"Soleil." American said quietly. "You made me realize that I was going about this all wrong. I'm not an outsider to Ignis: I'm one of the people. And I need to do everything I can do for my own. And the most important thing I need to do, before anything else is to start a family. Will you marry me?"

Soleil closed her eyes and let out a deep breath.

"This isn't how I wanted to be proposed to." She said slowly. But then she smiled. "But I can't have expected anything less."

She held out her hands to him, and he clasped them tightly. They stared at each other.

"I don't care if it's ten years, twenty, or fifty..." American said quietly.

"I will make Ignis a better place for our children."

"And I... am yours." Soleil said.

...

"You're getting married?" Persephone screeched over the phone. American held the phone away from him: Her voice was way too loud.

"Yeah, I asked her last night." He said.

"Oh, I'm so happy for you." Persephone gushed. "I mean, I thought the two of you would get married because you're always together, but I never thought it would happen so soon! And so suddenly!"

"Yeah, it was really sudden." American admitted. "It just kind of felt... right in the moment, you know?"

"Oh, I'll have to fly Soleil out to LA and buy her a dress!" Persephone gushed. "I love Indiana, but it's not the place for a wedding... you should all come out, I'll invite some of my celebrity friends and-"

"Soleil wants to keep it quiet." American said, cutting her off. "We're probably not even going to have a formal wedding."

"What? Why?"

"It's not what we want."

"It's not what Soleil wants, you mean." Persephone grumbled. American wondered how she had known. "Look. I'm going to talk to her about this, and see if she changes her mind." She hung up without saying good-bye.

American placed the phone on his leg and cast a glance at Soleil. "She's more excited than you are."

"I told you she would be." Soleil said. Her own phone went off and she clicked it open.

"Hello?" American could hear Persephone speaking angrily from the phone. Soleil rolled her eyes at him and shook her head. A swooshing sound came from overhead.

American looked up. Minerva flew in, carrying a bunch of flowers.

"For the Bride." She said pompously, as she threw them all onto Soleil's head in a messy heap. "May your nest bear many eggs="

"We're not owls, Minerva." American told her, exasperated. "I can see why you're still single."

Minerva ruffled her feathers.

"There are many fishes in the sea, but no owls in the sky." Minerva said. "Especially in this line of work. Diablo works me too late to meet anyone."

"Don't owls go out at night?" American asked. Soleil shot him a rare smile as she answered Persephone's rapid fire questions as quickly and simply as possible.

"No, we will have the ceremony in France... after we deal with Ignis... Yes, he's been good to me... I'll tell you when I see you... What?"

She listened intently, nodding along.

"Hm." She said. "I see. We will see you soon, I expect. Good-bye."
She hung up the phone.

"What did she want?"

"She just wanted to congratulate us." She told him. "And ask me what our plans are."

"But we don't have plans."

"Not yet." Soleil said. "But my family is in France, so I... that's what I want." She turned a little bit pink.

"We'll go after we get settled in Ignis." American told her. She smiled at him warmly.

"It's a clever idea, you know." She said. "The Ignis primarily target families... they wouldn't expect one to be targeting them back."

"I'll try to be a good husband." American said.

"And I'll try to be a good wife." Soleil said. "When are we leaving?"

"Today." American said. "I've already secured a home."

"Really?" Soleil was surprised. "I thought I would have to pay for it."

"Nah, as it turns out my old house has been untouched since I left. We'll just live there."

"I see." Soleil seemed to be considering something. "Is it nice?"

"I thought so, growing up." American said. "I haven't been back since I left."

"We'll have to make it ours." Soleil said, humming softly. "How does five kids sound?"

"Just to start with?"

She reached for a pillow and threw it at him. Both of them were trying to hide their laughter.

They went down to the workshop to check up on Gear's work. The old man was staring enraptured at his newest project.

The gleaming car was put together by hand. Pure white in color, it glistened as if the sun were shining directly on it. Each individual

part was handcrafted to never break or deteriorate. The engine was far more powerful than the standard, and a number of unique weapons were built into it for all manner of occasions.

"I call 'er Beatrice." The old man said gruffly, as American stepped forward to get a better look at it. Soleil stood back, and allowed the men to talk.

"It's gorgeous." American said. "How much did it cost?"

Gear waved his hand dismissively.

"Next to nothing. I knew what I was doing."

Gear gave him a glance. "Are you leaving today?"

"Yes." American said, nodding. "As soon as you give me the keys."

Gear flipped the keys over to him, and American held them up for Soleil to see.

"Ready for a drive?"

She nodded, stepping forward, and entered the passenger side of the car. She looked around at the button and knobs once, and then leaned back in her chair.

"Doesn't appreciate good machina that one." Gear growled. Soleil was known for hardly ever using the things that he made for her, a fact that he took quite personally.

"She doesn't need it." American said. "I do. So keep working on those weapons for me."

Gear nodded. "Take care of yourself, kid."

"You too."

American walked around the side of the car, opened the door wide, and got in.

"Dante!"

The giant hellhound leapt forward, he struggled a bit, getting the back door unlatched, but eventually crawled through the window

and lay sprawled out on his side. He was so large he took the entire backseat by himself. Soleil cast a look at him.

‘He looks too comfortable.’ She said dryly.

“You don’t.” American said. “Do you not like the car?”

“Not particularly.” Soleil said. “It’s just a car like any other.”

They pulled out of the garage and into the street. Soleil stared out of the window as American spun the wheel around and took off. Soleil sat, her fist pressed against her cheek, as American drove the car out of the city limits.

“How far till we reach Ignis?”

“Probably a couple of hours.” American told her.

“Hm.” Soleil was notorious for disliking small talk. She would perk up once they started talking about work.

“Our first order of business should be to convert the house into a proper headquarters.” American said. “We need to up our security measures and secure a pathway for Minerva to come and go as she pleases.”

Soleil nodded. “Neither of us are particularly good at magic. I think we should focus on building up our natural defenses first.”

“I think I should handle that.” American said. “But I need you to be vigilant while I’m working.”

“Of course.” Soleil said. “As long as I am present there will be nothing to fear.”

“I’m not the one at risk here.” American told her. “We need to consider the needs of the people around us.”

“We are not sure how much of the town is controlled by the Ignis.” Soleil reminded him. “It’s very possible that all of our neighbors may be intricately involved with the cult.”

“My parents weren’t.”

“You don’t know that for certain.” Soleil said. American shot her a dark look. “No, I mean it.” She continued, doubling down. “You were

young. You weren't aware of what problems they had or what they were doing in their personal lives."

"My parents were good people."

"They put you in danger by choosing to live in Ignis." Soleil said bluntly. "It is vital you understand this: your parents are no different than others who choose to live here."

American turned back to the road. His mind was processing the information in his head. She wasn't wrong.

"Does that make them bad people, though?" He asked. "People aren't always responsible for what happens around them. People do the best they can. Regardless of their circumstances..."

He gripped the steering wheel.

"If they hadn't been killed, I might still be living there now."

Soleil cast him a cool glance. "Yes." She said softly. "There is some wisdom to that. But we cannot compromise the operation to save every person who may or may not support the cult. We must accept the fact that innocent people may become caught in the crossfire."

American sighed. "This isn't going to be easy." He admitted. "But it must be done."

They talked a little bit about their plans as they rolled along. The developed streets of Indianapolis turned into lonely, isolated roads. Highways were surrounded on either side were surrounded by nothing but forests as they moved along.

"Ignis is located in the heart of Indiana." Soleil told him, as he drove. "It's often isolated, secluded communities who choose to allow these kinds of cults to take shape... the government itself goes to great lengths to discourage it."

They turned onto a road and rolled along. American had to stop himself from staring. The area was starting to look familiar.

They drove along the roads in silence.

"I suppose I need to think of this problem as our problem." Soleil said quietly. "And, perhaps, you need to consider Amaris Yew your problem."

"That's true." American acknowledged. "What do I need to know?"

"My Mother can explain it to you better than I ever could." Soleil said. "I've written her a letter explaining everything. She's planning your history lessons now."

American, for the briefest of moments, almost felt himself feeling like a kid again. Whose only real concern was doing well in school to keep his Mother happy. He was still thinking that as they pulled into the driveway of his old home.

"We're here."

Soleil stepped out and surveyed the surrounding area with a critical eye. Most would likely chalk up her critical gaze as being typical French snobbishness, but American knew better. She was evaluating potential security risks.

"It almost seems like to me this house is already protected." She said at last. "See, here, at the edge of the property....?"

She pointed, and American followed her finger. There was a pretty noticeable difference in the size of the trees in their backyard versus that of their neighbors. Theirs looked fully grown and healthy, while the neighbors looked as if they had only just been planted.

"Fire." Soleil breathed. "I would bet my life on it. These houses are torched regularly, perhaps as much as every ten years. And..."

Her gaze run down the street.

"There was a house some distance away with even smaller trees than that." She said. "Am I correct in assuming that was Sinistra's house?"

"Well, it was a new building, but it was the same property."

Soleil nodded, the wheels turning in her head.

"So she's protecting your house and torching her own." She mused.
"Interesting."

"I'm surprised that no one else has torched it." American replied.
"It's not like she's the only witch in the area."

"Why don't you show me the house?" Soleil suggested, as she took his arm. "We need to have an idea of what we're dealing with here."

The key was right where he had left it seven years ago: Under a potted plant that should have long ago withered away. They stared at it. It was green and healthy. It looked just the same as it had when he had left.

"Someone's taking care of the plants." American said.

"No." Soleil said quietly. "I've heard stories of this... plants in this city grow rapidly and never seem to wither away, unless burned."
American stepped forward and raised the key to the door.

"We won't need that." Soliel said, as he opened the door with the key. "We'll have Gear come by and install locks that can only unlock for us."

American nodded, and he placed the used key on the table as they stepped inside.

It was just how he remembered it. A layer of dust covered every photograph, every bit of furniture, every countertop. He couldn't explain why, but his eyes began to fill up with tears.

"Come now." Soleil said gently, tugging at his arm. "We're going to make new memories here."

He rubbed his eyes, embarrassed, as he led her into the kitchen. Everything was old and in disuse: American wasn't sure whether appliances like the refrigerator or the oven would work properly.

"There's only one way to find out." Soleil said. "We'll have to use them."

"We'll have to get the power back on, first." American said, as he flipped the Switch. The lights failed to switch on. "I guess the bill hasn't been paid in a decade..."

"I doubt people here have to pay for their power." Soleil said. "There may be some other explanation."

"I'll take a look at it." American said.

Soleil was examining an old photograph.

"Soleil?"

She handed him the photograph.

"Is this her?"

American looked at it. It was a photograph of him, his parents, and a scowling Sinistra. She was holding a soccer ball and looking away from the camera. She had always hated having her photo taken. But he remembered that day well... the instant the shutter went off she had turned back to him and smiled.

"It is." He said. "That's Sinistra."

"Those streaks in her hair..." Soleil traced her finger across the red lines that Sinistra had dyed into her black hair. "Those are Ignis colors. She was already training to be a witch when this was taken."

American stared at it. It was hard to believe... impossible for him to believe...that she had already been planning to become a witch that day.

"Calm yourself." Soleil said sharply. "We must learn everything we can about our enemy." She rapped the photo with her finger. "What can you tell me about the day this was taken?"

American stared at it. He told the story tonelessly, without emotion. They had had a big soccer game with another team. Sinistra had almost not been able to go due to a family emergency. His parents had offered to take her in their place. She had been so upset that she hadn't been playing very well, but she had pulled through for the team in the end.

"Her parents." Soleil wondered aloud, when he had finished. "What were they like?"

"They were cruel to her." American admitted. "But she wouldn't talk about it."

"Hmmm."

Soleil stared at the photograph and set it on the table.

They spent their afternoon tending to their tasks: American focused on getting the power back on and checking all of their appliances, while Soleil spent her time re-organizing the office space. Everything that was of no use to them was set aside. Soleil told him that he would have to go through everything later to make sure that nothing valuable would be disposed of by accident. By the end of the night piles of boxes lay outside in the hall, and Soleil had cleared way for what she called their investigation room.

She placed the photograph of Sinistra on desk and nodded to herself.

"That will do for now." She said.

American yawned. "Everything looks fine." He said. "I think we'll need to check the pipes and the wiring... make sure that nothing's fallen into disrepair. It might take a couple of weeks to make this place properly habitable."

"I'll leave all of that to you." Soleil said. "Until then, I suppose we'll have to make camp."

American grinned. "You want to sleep in a tent?"

Soleil frowned at him. "We have shelter, but we'll need food and water. Power we can do without entirely."

They spoke at length about their immediate plans for the rest of the evening.

...

"I'm going to head out."

American looked up to see Soleil, freshly dressed in a bright yellow sundress, standing above him.

"What for?"

"Surveillance." Came the curt reply. "I haven't had the chance to have a look around the community yet."

American nodded. "That's true." He acknowledged. "I need to get this done." He indicated the water pipe that had broken open when they had tried to turn the water on earlier in the day. "I'll hold down the fort while you do what you have to do."

Soleil felt her heart soar.

"Thank you." She said. "I'll be back before dark."

She donned a large brimmed hat that covered her entire head, slipped on her sandals, and off she went.

The first thing she had noticed when she had arrived in Ignis was the climate: it was relatively warm here year round. It was not unusual for the entire state to be shut down due to snowstorms or the like, but the climate in Ignis was always the same. Warm, pleasant, and inviting. Soleil could see immediately why this town might be appealing to young couples: it felt almost like a vacation spot farther south.

"Hello!" A voice called out to her as she stepped out onto the sidewalk.

Soleil stopped. She raised her hand to her hat to adjust it, as the woman who had approached her walked towards her.

"I was wondering who that car belonged to!" She said, beaming, as she stepped up to her. "I'm Melanie..."

She held out her hand, and Soleil took it. Melanie smiled, but Soleil could see that she was a little bit on guard.

"Soleil." Soleil said curtly. "Blade." She flushed, shaking her head. "Excuse me. Freeman. I've only recently gotten married..."

The woman beamed at her.

"Oooh, congratulations!" She said. "Not a lot of girls get married at your age these days... they tend to want to run wild."

"I try not to be like most girls." Soleil said dryly, and Melanie laughed.

"Is your husband home?"

"The house has some problems with the pipe work and the wiring... he's working on that now."

"My, my." Melanie clicked her tongue. "That house has been empty for a long time... I always thought it must have fell into some state of disrepair. Well, if you need anything, be sure to let me know."

"That is very kind of you." Soleil said. She bid her goodbyes and walked down the street. She took notice of a rather depressed little girl sitting by the side of the road, and an old woman watching her from her porch.

"You!"

Soleil glanced at the old woman.

"That house belongs to the Freeman family." The woman rasped.

"Are you-"

"I married their son." Soleil informed her. The woman glared at her.

"He came back?" She snarled. "After he killed that poor police officer in cold blood?"

"Please don't speak ill of my husband." Soleil said coldly. The woman looked taken aback for a second, before angrily berating her. Soleil was already walking away, the words not truly registering.

She made one last stop before walking into the city proper: she got a better look at Sinistra's old house. It had been very recently burned again, but construction had already begun on its replacement. She wondered why they even bothered, and hoped dearly that the family that had been living there was alright.

It was quite a long walk into the city, but Soleil enjoyed it. She had been expecting this city to be a complete dump, but upon first observation every house was nice and well kept. She saw plenty of people milling about on their property and on the road, and some

even tried to talk to her. On the surface it looked to be a picturesque Midwestern town.

She knew better than to be fooled, though. If Ignis was an openly hostile place people would never want to live here. She was certain that among the smiling faces and pleasant homes were worshippers of Ignis. Doubtless they were always on the hunt for new prey

Being a young, attractive woman, Soleil knew that she would be a prime target for these sorts of sacrifices.

It was best to stay on her guard.

The residential district gave way to Main Street. She stepped forward cautiously, noting the change in atmosphere. Small shops and businesses stood abandoned on both sides of the road, and the streets themselves were empty. Soleil knew immediately: She had just stepped right onto their territory.

"You don't belong here."

Soleil did not turn around. A filthy looking man was standing some distance away, staring at her.

"Leave now." He rasped, as he raised a trembling finger at her. "If you know what's good for you."

Soleil closed her eyes.

"I could say the same for you, sir." She said. "What do you know of the Evil that lurks here?"

The man was still there. She could sense him. But he did not answer her. She turned to face him, intent on getting answers, only to find that there was no one there.

"Leave." The man's voice hit her left ear, in a whisper.

And then he was gone.

He had been a ghost. Some strong emotion had kept him tied to this place. To him, it had been his dearest wish to spend eternity warning others not to befall his fate. Soleil felt a strong melancholic pity.

"Rest in peace." Soleil murmured, clasping her hands together. She prayed for him quietly, and passionately. But she was aware enough of her surroundings to tell that she was being watched.

"What are you doing?"

It was a girl, perhaps three or four years younger than herself, with bright pink hair. She pursed open her lips and blew a large pink bubble from the gum in her mouth.

"Praying." Soleil said. "Someone died here."

The girl tilted her head. The bubble popped.

"We all have to die sometime." She said. "I don't see why you care. Was he your boyfriend or something?"

Soleil did not answer. She continued her prayer silently, her lips mouthing the words in her heart. The girl frowned.

"It's not polite to ignore someone when she's talking to you, you know."

Soleil could see the girl would not be deterred. She opened her eyes and turned towards her.

"And you are?"

The girl blew another bubble. It let out another loud POP.

"Ignis Candypop." She said. "A pleasure."

"You're a witch." Soleil stated, not all that surprised.

"That's right." Candypop said, sounding somewhat pleased. "You're not scared of me. I can tell. I like that."

She adjusted the round things on the side of her head and Soleil suddenly realized they were headphones. "Oh, I hate this song." She complained.

Soleil contemplated what to do. It was probably unwise to step into the den of the enemy and draw blood. For now they should just talk.

"You're not frightened of me either."

"Oh, you won't do shit." Candypop said. *Language.* Soleil thought to herself irritably. "You're in danger, you know."

"I gathered as much." Soleil said dryly. "How many of you are in the area?"

"There's only one me." The girl said, grinning cheerfully.

Soleil turned away from her.

"I suppose you know nothing after all." She said quietly, as if more to herself than to her. "You must be only an acolyte."

Candypop's eyes bulged. Her long pink hair billowed back behind her, as her rather youthful face twisted and contorted into a sinister parody of itself. Gnarled and scarred, she bared her fangs and raised a single knife high above her head-

Soleil spun around so fast and hit her so hard that she didn't even have time to react. The witch let out a cry as she was slammed onto the concrete. Her skull split open with a crack. Soleil raised her foot and stepped on her, her toes digging into her neck.

"Move and I'll snap your head off." Soleil said. Her voice was quiet, but it was firm. The creature managed to gargle out a reply:

"Who-"

"I am Soleil Freeman." Soleil said coldly. "Tell me everything you know about your coven."

Ignis Candypop shut her mouth tightly. Soleil stared down at her. "A quiet one, are you?" She asked coldly. "How about-"

"Freeze!"

Soleil did not look up. A female police officer had come onto the scene, weapon drawn.

"Well?" Soleil asked the girl under her foot. "Spit it out now or things are going to get ugly."

"I said freeze!"

The officer advanced, her weapon raised. Soleil cast her a glance.

"Get down on your knees and place your hands on your head!"

"She attacked me first." Soleil explained quietly. "I was defending myself."

"Down!"

Soleil looked back down at the witch underfoot. She was smiling. Doubtless she felt that Soleil would be forced to back down.

"She attacked me Officer." Candypop whined. "Without cause!"

"She is a witch." Soleil said promptly. "Under federal law I am permitted to-"

The officer fired a shot. Soleil stood tall as the bullet came towards her, and then just as suddenly darted to the side and away from her. Soleil glowered at the officer.

"Don't make me hurt you." Soleil said quietly. The woman stared at her intently, and then adjusted the radio on her neck.

"Requesting reinforcements. Over."

She turned back to face her and gave her a hard look. She placed the gun back in its holster and took on a fighting stance.

"Believe me." Soleil said. "You are going to regret this."

The girl charged at her, fist raised. Soleil could tell immediately that she had been trained very well. Her movements were quick, her form was perfect, and she could sense her aura flaring. This Officer would be a massive threat to any normal person she encountered on the street.

Soleil was not a normal person.

Soleil brought her fist up, almost lazily, and caught the girl mid swing. Blood spurted out of her nose as she reeled back, stepping back several feet to try and regain her balance. Soleil's foot was still firmly planted on Candypop's neck.

The girl staggered, and then glared at Soleil through red eyes.

"It's a crime to strike an officer."

"This town doesn't truly have crimes." Soleil said. "Other than inconveniencing Ignis and his followers."

The woman took a deep breath, and retook her fighting stance.

"Who are you?" She demanded. "How do you know these things?"

"I am Soleil Freeman." Soleil said. The officer strafed back and forth, watching her intently, desperate to find some sort of opening. Soleil didn't budge. The officer, clearly sensing she was outmatched, didn't try to move again.

"Just wait. There are plenty of people on the force stronger than me." She snarled.

"There would have to be, to keep this town in line." Soleil said, as she pressed her foot deeper into Candypop's neck. The girl whimpered. "The instant that someone stands up to the Ignis, you come running. It's disgusting."

The girl stared her down. "The Ignis protect us from the government."

"And you allow them to pillage the people." Soleil snapped.

"The Cattle are worthless." The girl said, disgust clear in her voice.

"They choose to come here, in droves, hoping to leech off of this little piece of paradise."

Soleil frowned. She waved her hand at the derelict, unkempt buildings.

"You call this paradise?"

The girl reached for her back and pulled out a baton. She twirled it around in her hand as she surveyed her opponent.

Soleil could hear police sirens approaching. The average police response time was about fifteen minutes: It would not be much longer until someone arrived on the scene. She was fairly confident that she could fight off anyone she came across, but then there was the cult to contend with. She had no choice.

She released the girl.

Candypop Ignis immediately scrambled to get away. She rolled over and ran on all fours to move away from her.

"I'm not done with you." Soleil said to her, as she finally got to her feet, wheezing huge huffs of air. "I will get what I need out of you."

Ignis Candypop turned almost white.

"No you aren't." The officer said, as she advanced. "I'm bringing you in."

Soleil ignored her. She was already walking away.

"Freeze!"

Soleil tipped her hat and kept walking.

"I said FREEZE!"

The girl charged forward, gun pointed forward. Soleil did not turn around as the girl jammed the weapon into her head.

"Stop or I'll shoot!"

Soleil did not stop. The woman fired.

The gun exploded in her hands. The officer screamed as the explosion tore her hand into pieces. She clutched her stump of a hand and fell to her knees, as Soleil kept walking.

She got about ten paces away before she glanced back, stopping in place.

"A fair warning, to my enemy." Soleil said. "I am not alone."

The girl went completely white. Candypop stared, her mouth wide open.

Soleil turned back around, bent her head, and walked away. The sirens converged onto the spot, and the cops raced out. By the time they had a handle on the situation, Soleil was long gone.

...

Dante let out a yawn as he snuggled deep into the cushions of the couch. His forked tail was slapping against the cushion with gusto. He hadn't had a thing to do all day, and it was a refreshing change.

He loved fighting, and killing whatever American asked him to, but ever since he had been brought to this new place he hadn't been given much to do, other than some vague command to 'protect the property.'

"I'm home."

Dante's ears perked up. He lifted his head and glanced towards the front door lazily as Soleil walked into the house. She cast him a disinterested look as his tail continued to thump against the couch.

"Some guard dog." She said contemptuously. Dante bared his teeth at her. She turned her back to him and made her way into the kitchen, and his ears drooped. He hated to admit it, but as strong and powerful as he was, he feared that woman more than anyone he had ever met.

Soleil entered the kitchen to find American pouring over papers. He did not look up at her as she approached.

"The water's on." He said. "And the electricity. We'll be able to cook a real meal tonight." He looked rather pleased with himself.

"You look exhausted." Soleil said, taking in his appearance. His clothes were filthy and coated with dust, and his eyes were a little red.

"I've been working all night." He told her. "Did you find out anything?"

Soleil relayed all that had happened while she had been out, and American nodded along.

"The police are after us now, it seems."

"It was as you said." Soleil said, her voice grim. "The instant I raised my hand against the Cult, they came down on me. I can't imagine how they must treat the people who live here."

American raised his head. "Dante?"

Dante raised his head from the couch.

"Keep an eye out for the local police." American instructed. Dante nodded his head, got up off the couch, and trotted to the door. He twisted the door open with his long, versatile tail and trotted out into the street.

"It's good to see him being put to good use." Soleil said. "But be careful with him. We mustn't take our enemies lightly. I myself felt uneasy on their territory."

"How much does their control extend, do you think?"

"Residential areas seems to be fairly normal, although I'm sure it's nothing but a façade. The center of the city seems more involved with the cult... although I imagine the true heart of the hive lies elsewhere."

"Hm." American said to himself. "What are they protecting in the city, I wonder?"

"Possibly children." Soleil said. "I met a young girl who was already a witch. She showed no tremendous talent. I suspect she was born one."

American frowned.

"What is their hierarchy like, I wonder?"

"I doubt they have one." Soleil answered. "The Ignis are traditionally very disorganized... they're not known to live in large groups like this at all. I suppose they must be trying to adapt to the modern world."

"Hellraisers rely on their High Witches to keep the peace." American said. "There must be a High Witch who is creating these policies, and if we destroy her-"

"Another will take her place."

American smiled.

"We just kill her too."

Soleil stared at him. And then she nodded.

...

The small group of police officers were surrounding the scene. Officer Dick took a long drag out of his cigarette and stared down at the concrete.

A footprint of a sandal had been pressed into solid concrete. The photographer raised his camera and took a shot, recording the evidence.

"I've never seen anything like it." The officer in charge of the scene told Dick. "I don't know what we're dealing with here."

"A monster, that's what."

They turned to look at Officer Kitty. She had not been allowed to have her hand treated after her gun had exploded in her hands, and she nursed it tenderly, having wrapped it in a piece of her shirt that she had torn off from the bottom. She was now showing off quite a bit of her midriff.

"A monster?" Dick repeated. "Greek?"

She let out a deep breath. "French."

Dick gave the officer a puzzled look.

"Officer Kitty accosted this woman as she was in the middle of assaulting an acolyte of Ignis. Kitty, assuming that she had the situation under control, chose to step in herself."

Kitty was one of the best female officers in Ignis in combat situations. She had every right to be confident going in. Dick had never known her to lose a fight, but to see her in the condition she was in now.

"We need to identify this woman immediately." He said. "She's dangerous and a threat to the peace-"

"That won't be necessary."

Dick looked up. The acolyte was lying on her back with her legs crossed, her foot bouncing up and down on her knee. One would never expect that she had just gotten on the losing side of a fight.

"What?" Dick growled. It always rankled him whenever an acolyte, a girl without any real power in the Ignis, tried bossing him around. Especially when it had been his woman who had saved her life not even an hour before.

"You can't handle her." The Pink-haired girl said, as she sat up. "It's going to take some real firepower to even break one of her nails."

Dick bit back his tongue. "What would you recommend?"

"Hm." The acolyte lay back down. "Stand down. Go kick a puppy or something, dickless."

Dick stepped forward.

"What'd you say to me?" He growled.

The Pink haired girl smiled at him.

"I said you have no dick." She said sweetly. "Didn't you hear me?"

Officer Dick drew his weapon and fired. Kitty screamed at him to stop as the bullet shot forward. The bullet shot straight towards her head. It suddenly swerved out of the way and missed its target.

The Pink haired girl looked at him. She arched her back, and slowly rose to her feet. She did not use her hands or feet, but her magic: Her body arched upward, as if she were falling down in reverse.

When she was standing, she was no longer smiling.

"You dare attack me, Officer?" She asked. Her face was still pleasant. She did not even feel the need to transform. Officer Dick fired again. Again the bullet swerved out of the way. Her magical aura was so overwhelmingly powerful that mere bullets would not even go near her.

The other officers were backing away, looking frightened. Kitty, however, called out to him.

"When you die, can I be chief?"

Dick cast her a disgusted glance, which is all Ignis Candypop needed. She darted forward, her hand becoming a vicious claw, and penetrated his chest with one sharp jab.

The officers winced as she pulled the still beating heart out of his chest. Officer Dick stared as the heart, still attached to his insides, as Candypop slowly caressed it in her hands.

"Ooooooh it's so biiiiig." She said. She cupped the heart in her hands and stared down at her lovingly. She lowered her head, and then kissed it. She then opened her mouth and took a big bite out of it, tearing it apart with her teeth.

Officer Dick gasped.

"Oh no." Kitty said, her voice monotone, as Dick fell to the ground in a heap. "What ever will we do without you?" Already her mind was thinking back to that giant cask of alcohol he always kept under his desk. She would be putting it to good use tonight.

Candypop threw the heart to the side half-eaten and gave condescending glance to all of the officers surrounding her.

"Let this be a reminder that we don't tolerate those who step out of line You can push around the Cattle all you want. Rape high school girls, shoot dogs, rob old ladies, whatever. But don't you DARE think that you can defy the Will of Ignis."

She raised a finger to Officer Dick's corpse and an intense wave of flame shot out. The corpse exploded into flame, and burnt to ash.

"The police are not equipped to handle this threat." Candypop said. "If even I, a Witch Born of Ignis, could not defend myself against this warrior... you haven't a hope."

The officers stood enraptured as she floated upward. She stared down at the officers with a certain degree of contempt.

"There is one among you who can perhaps defeat Soleil Freeman... the man known as the Shadow of Ignis."

...

Soleil woke up to the smell of cooking downstairs. She hadn't really eaten since she had arrived, and so she found herself feeling rather peckish as she moved downstairs to the kitchen.

"Good morning." American greeted, his back to her, as he bustled with the pots and pans. Soleil sat gracefully, her hands folded across her lap. Dante was already eating a giant red steak.

"What are we having?"

"Your favorite. Just like I promised."

She had to stop herself from smiling as he set the plate in front of her, and a glass of tea. He sat across from her and they stared at each other.

"Did anything happen during your watch?" Soleil asked him.

"No. Did you sleep well?"

"I did. A little too well, I fear. I lost track of time."

"Most people enjoy sleeping.."

"I am not most people."

"I know. You're my wife."

Soleil couldn't help it. She laughed.

"We should go out on our first expedition." American said. "The three of us versus the Ignis."

Dante looked up. He looked excited at the idea. Soleil pursed her lips. The food was delicious, but she couldn't help but be concerned.

"Outnumbered as we are I can't protect you." She said.

American shook his head.

"I don't need to be protected." He said firmly. "I can hold my own. Besides, Dante will be with us."

The Hellhound barked his agreement.

"We aren't dealing with amateurs here, American." Soleil said. "If something were to happen to you, I-"

She stopped, taking in a deep breath.

"Won't have anyone to cook me breakfast." She said, trying to keep her voice stoic. American laughed at her, and she felt her cheeks go red.

"It's fine, I'll leave you the recipe."

"That isn't what I-"

"Look." American said, sounding more serious. "I have to do this."

Soleil stared at him. He would not budge.

"Very well." She said. "But I guarantee you that we will see some sort of combat."

He stared at her with a steely expression. "That's what I'm hoping for."

"Don't be reckless." She admonished him. "Never underestimate your enemy. Always go into battle prepared to die."

She stood up. Her sleeveless yellow tanktop had replaced the sundress. It was somewhat tight and showed off quite a bit of her

stomach. Her tan shorts showed quite a lot of her long, powerful legs. Her sandals today had been replaced by more practical shoes.

"Be prepared for anything." She told him, as he finished his own breakfast. He nodded, and got to his feet as well. He walked across the table, and took Soleil's hand.

"Ah-"

She flinched slightly, and seemed to almost want to pull away from him. After a brief moment she relaxed, her fingers wrapping around his own.

"I'm sorry." Soleil said quietly. "I'm not..." She couldn't even finish her sentence. She felt embarrassed. It was one another to have never been kissed or to have had a boyfriend... it was quite another to have never have her hand held.

"It's fine." American said, as he led her to the door. "You'll get used to it." He whistled, and Dante looked up from the bone of his steak, and followed them out. As if emboldened by his words, Soleil lay her head against his shoulder as they walked down their driveway, past their car and into the street.

"Where should we go first?" American inquired.

Soleil raised her head, but before she could respond the three of them were waved down. Melanie, the woman that Soleil had spoken to on her first trip out, was out and about.

"Good morning!"

"Good morning." They said, as they approached her. Dante, knowing very well how frightening he could be, lay down some distance away as the couple came to a stop.

"So you're the man of the house." Melanie said to them. "And I would guess that the dog was yours before the marriage."

American smiled. "You're a pretty good guesser."

"What are the two of you doing today?"

"Soleil wants to show me around town now that the house is habitable." American said. His tone was casual, but he was carefully evaluating her reaction. The woman smiled widely.

"That sounds lovely." She said warmly. "But there isn't much there, I'm afraid... It isn't worth seeing."

"I'm sure we'll find something of interest." American said.

They said their good-byes and went their separate ways. Soleil's arm in his, Dante the Hellhound trotting behind.

"Did you catch that?" American whispered to her. "She was trying to steer us away from going into town. What does that mean, do you think?"

"It may mean nothing." Soleil hissed. "She may be being genuinely neighborly.... Maybe."

"I doubt it."

"We mustn't jump to conclusions." Soleil warned him. "We need more information."

"Sounds like a job for Minerva." American said quietly. "I'll call for her when we return."

Soleil nodded at him. Dante trotted in front of them, his forked tail swinging back and forth.

"That dog is a MENACE!" The old lady down the street screamed at them from her porch.

"The dog does more for the world than you ever did!" American shouted back. Soleil silently stood by his side, gripping his hand firmly.

"You're that Freeman boy, aren't you?" The woman sneered, spit falling out of her face. "I saw you, that day, seven years ago when you killed that poor man of the law--"

"The one that was trying to kidnap me, you mean?" American asked loudly. A girl down the street stopped what she was doing to stop and stare at them.

The woman raised a shaking finger.

"You should show more respect to those who protect you your freedom, boy!" She sneered.

American turned to Soleil. "What an old bat."

"Miserable old woman." Soleil said immediately. She had already spoken to her twice and had already gained a healthy dislike for her.

"The two of you will burn in the fires of--"

The three of them kept walking. The woman was shouting after them as they headed into the town proper.

"Who is she?" Soleil asked.

"Some old bat who's been here all my life." American said derisively.

"She seems to have a low opinion of you."

"She treats everyone like trash. I avoided her."

"Hm. If she's lived here a long time, she might know something about the Ignis."

"You think?"

"We'll pay her a visit sometime and ask."

American nodded.

They spoke in hushed tones as they walked, falling silent only when people were approaching them. To American's trained eye he spot several people he was sure were cult worshippers. A fifteen year old girl walked by with a bloody knife in her hand. Soleil, however, proved herself able to spot things that he would easily overlook.

"Those marks on her face are burn marks."

"What?"

"She might be being pressured into joining the cult." Soliel said quietly. "Or, perhaps, it's a rite of passage..."

The girl tucked her hair behind her ear and glanced at them. Soleil was staring at her rather intently. American had to lead her away.

Soleil wanted to stay away from the center of the city, so they instead drifted around the perimeter. They saw plenty of evidence of Ignis' presence... graffiti, public shrines for worship, and signs of intense fire damage cleverly concealed by work crews.

"This is the work of professionals." American noted, as they stopped in front of a fence of a local business. The tips of the iron fence were sharp spikes that protruded upward. But somehow in the past they had become twisted downward. Someone had carefully straightened them back again, but minor signs of damage remained.

"They'll go to any lengths to pretend this is a normal American town." Soleil said quietly, as she ran her finger of the tip of the fence. A bright blue glow emanated from it. "Hm. Traces of blood. I expect someone was impaled here, and then burned... the heat caused the metal to bend."

"What are you two doing?"

Soleil did not look up. A large, burly man strode out to meet them, his eyes blazing. He stood in front of them, a large knife and a handgun wrapped around his waist.

"Someone was killed here." American told him. "You wouldn't know anything about that... would you, sir?"

The man narrowed his eyes.

"What are you, some kind of cop?"

American smiled widely.

"Nope. A cop can be controlled."

They stared at each other, and then each went for their guns. Soleil did not raise her head from her examination of the fence as the large man crumpled at their feet, a large bullet wound in his head.

American bent down to examine the body. "He's a Witch." He said, visible disgust in his voice. "But I think he must have been born one... and without particularly strong powers." The man's face had transformed into the distinctive, scowling look of the Master who had spawned him.

“Very good.” Soleil said. “Anything else?”

“Nothing I can see.”

She looked up at him, frowning.

“Amateur.” She said. “Let me see.”

Police sirens could be heard in the distance. Doubtless someone had heard them, and were beginning to investigate.

“Guard.” American said to Dante, who quickly took point. Soleil made her way to the body and kneeled down.

“Your assessment was not incorrect.” She said. “But there is more to be gleaned here.” She pointed at his state of dress. “He was posing as a civilian... he wouldn’t have been working an ordinary job if he was a part of the cult’s inner circle. Doubtless he is of the Lower Caste...”

“That isn’t so unusual for male witches.” American noted. Women were naturally far more gifted at magic than men, and therefore generally enjoyed much higher status in their respective communities.

The sirens were getting longer. Dante growled, bending over.

“Stay.” American said to him, as Soleil continued her analysis.

“As a member of the lower caste, doubtless his role is to interact directly with the people and influence their behavior. I imagine the entire city is filled with people just like this.”

The police cars came to a stop right by where they were standing.

“That’s nice, Soleil, but we have company.”

Again Soleil did not bother looking up. Knowing that she was in the middle of something critical, American turned to face them alone.

Dante was standing poised, his teeth bared, as the six copes strode from their vehicles and into the street.

“Well, well, well.” The man in the middle drawled. “What do we have here?”

"A self defense situation." American said immediately. "You don't need to be involved, Officer."

The officer narrowed his eyes. The five men and women accompanying him readied themselves.

"I don't like your tone, boy." The Officer said. "You sound as if you don't respect me."

"I don't." American said bluntly.

The man went for his gun. American pulled his first and shot him. The others were already drawing their own weapons.

"Attack!" American barked to Dante.

Dante leapt forward on one of the women. She let out a cry as his teeth tore into her face, ripping her to shreds. In one fluid movement American shot the others. One after another they fell.

"I still have one bullet left." American said coldly, as he walked up to the pile of corpses. "You should have brought one more. Maybe then you could have gotten a shot in."

The woman that Dante was mauling desperately raised her pistol to his head and pulled the trigger. The bullet passed right through him, shredding through his head. But the mauling did not stop. The woman's hand fell limp as Dante stop straight up, the wound in his head already healing, as he let out a victorious howl.

"We can celebrate after we win, huh?"

Dante fell silent immediately, his eyes glittering with malice as more sirens began to approach. Soleil stood up.

"I'm done." She said quietly. "We should go."

"So soon?"

They looked up to see a pink haired girl staring down at them from above. Her long legs were crossed in front of her as she kicked her leg up and down.

"You." Soleil said.

"Ah, you recognize me." The girl said pleasantly. "I came as soon as I heard..." She shuddered, letting out a loud sigh. "Oh, you're in big trouble now. Both of you." Her eyes fell on American. "Who's the dude?"

"Her husband." American said.

The pink haired girl looked at him with something similar to contempt. "Eww. Even the dog would be preferable."

The girl pushed herself off of the edge of the building and gracefully floated down to them. She landed right on top of the awning in front of the door and bounced upward again. She flipped through the air, and then neatly landed in front of them.

Candypop raised her hand and snapped her fingers. Behind her a number of creatures peered down at them from above. Dante stared at them, and for the first time in all of their time together American saw him take a step back. The creatures leapt forward, through the air and landed with a crash on the street behind them.

There were five, in total. Red, flowing manes of fire ran down their necks, rather like the mane of a lion. Their jaws were wide and beastlike, with pure white teeth that could tear apart steel. Their finely muscled limbs were long and powerful, and could tear apart an ordinary man with a single gasp.

"Demons." Soleil said disparagingly. 'Spawn of Ignis himself, no doubt."

"Their mother is a lioness." Candypop said affectionately, as she stepped forward and patted the mane of flame.

The demonspawn advanced, snarling. Soleil stood tall. She drew two long swords, and brandished them threateningly. Like Dante, American found himself taking a step back, his gun at the ready. Dante growled, and prepared to defend himself.

Two of the beasts lunged at American. Dante leapt to defend him, catching one in mid-air, and they rolled, biting and snapping. Dante, American was sure, would easily be overpowered by even one of the

monsters. Although a demon himself Dante was not a particularly large or powerful one.

But he had no time to help, though. The second beast lunged for him. He raised his hand and pulled the trigger. To his shock no bullet came out. It took him a while to remember that he had never reloaded his gun.

He let out a cry as the thing pounced on him. Soleil turned to him, blades swinging, but the other three demons attacked her at once and she had to fight them off, gritting her teeth.

The demon raised its teeth to his head. American had no choice.

It is time to use it

The Waterwraith cloaked wrapped all over him like a blanket. The claws that had him pinned down were beginning to smoke. The monster reeled in pain, and released him.

American threw his fist forward, and an intense wave of water shot out from his arm. The thing screamed, reeling back in agony as American shakily got to his feet.

Dante was howling in pain as his demon set its jaws around his neck, clearly intending to rip his head off. . American raised his fist and shot a blast of water at it. The blast caught the monster in the side, blowing a hole into it. It reeled back in pain, and Dante leapt up, snarling, as he jumped inside his enemies body and started tearing it apart from the inside.

Soleil smiled to herself. Now that American had seized control over the situation, she had no need to worry. She took the blades and spun around, facing her three opponents with gusto.

American stood tall, the full power of the Waterwraith Armor covering his entire body.

"I've trained my entire life for this." He said coldly, as he stared at his opponent. "I always wanted to be a Firefighter."

The demon took a step back, but American lunged forward. The streams of water shooting from his back acting as a propulsion

system. The demon screamed as American's water clad fist met its jaw, knocking it clean off.

Candypop stood watching, appalled.

"A firefighter?" She asked. "Really?" She shook her head and took on a fighting stance. "Your kind isn't welcome around here."

Dante, having defeated his opponent, had rushed in to help Soleil. Now American faced the witch alone. She considered him, taking in the animalistic shape of her opponent.

"You look like a giant turtle." She told him.

American raised his hand and an intense burst of water burst out. She swerved out of the way, and rather like a dancer struck a pose, balancing on one foot with her other protruded far behind her.

"You fight like a girl." She told him.

Soleil turned around. In one movement she slashed the head off of one of the demons with her sword while catching another in a vicious kick, sending it soaring off into the sky.

"You have no idea how little that means to me." American told her, as the monster crashed down into the building behind her, collapsing it with the sheer force of its size and weight.

Candypop lowered her leg and considered him.

"I do not fear you, mortal man." She said. Soleil turned around to face her, her opponents very clearly in pieces at her feet. "But, uh, I am scared of your wife. So, I'm just going to bounce."

She leapt up into the air and flew off into the sky. American grimaced, and took off after her. His water propulsion easily keeping pace with her. She turned around to face him. Her face contorting into the monstrous shape of Ignis, and an intense blast of magical energy was sent his way.

He took the blast head on, and winced. It was not a fire based attack: A good chunk of the water covering him was blown away. He stalled in mid-air- the water was having trouble regenerating from the blow. Sensing weakness, Candypop fired off another shot, and

this time it hit his head. He went reeling back: The armor still firing off its stream caused him to spin wildly through the air and out of control. He had no choice. He stopped the water flow and focused his efforts on regenerating his armor. He had no way to stop himself as he continued his spinning downward. He slammed into the side of a building, shattering the bricks head first, as he crumpled to the ground.

It was a miracle the armor stopped him from being killed instantly. He lay on the ground, dazed and confused, as a concerned Soleil and Dante made their way over to him.

Soleil immediately bent over and easily picked up American off the ground. He was completely knocked out.

"Foolish." Soleil hissed. She gave him a quick once over to verify that his life was not in immediate danger, and then stood up, him in town. "Why did I ever marry you?"

Candypop landed on the building above them.

"it's not too late to leave to leave him, you know!" She called down to them.

Soleil took the sword at her side and threw it. Candypop screamed as the thing came within inches of her face, cutting off strands of hair.

Sensing that even with one of their number out of commission that she was still heavily outmatched, Candypop took off again.

"You haven't a hope of stopping us, woman!" She shouted down after her. "The flames of this town will consume you all!"

She cackled, sparks of flames emanating from the tips of her pink hair. Soleil gritted her teeth and had to let her go. Dante trotting along at her heels.

...

The newly elected Chief of Police Officer Kitty found herself riding her motorcycle, alone, through the streets of Ignis. She had lived here all her life and easily navigated the darkened streets. Danger

lurked around every corner: Intense flames burned in honor of the god of this place, the mighty Ignis. Her newly re-attached hand, which had been sewn back together by a witch, felt oddly new and powerful.

As a member of the police force, she enjoyed a certain amount of protection from the community. The Cattle believed her to be the only thing standing in the way of the rampant crime and chaos from the cult, while the cult itself saw her as important to maintaining order among the cattle. It was the best possible position to be in if you were completely incapable of ever becoming a witch.

Would be heroes and rebels that would protest the order of things here always needed to be watched and dealt with. Usually these cases were simple: Often the community itself did a good job of discouraging these people. And if not them, the Police would step up and crack some skulls.

But occasionally... very rarely... something came up that required the use of more extreme force. The absolute last line of defense available to them, The Shadow of Ignis. The most powerful creature at the police's disposal. The Champion of the Free, the greatest among the Cattle that had ever been produced.

Kitty came to a slow stop outside a large, rural estate. She adjusted her sunglasses and admired the dark, gloomy exterior. It was, perhaps, the most beautiful building in the area.

She stepped off of the bike and walked towards the front gate. She pressed the button connecting her to the estate.

A harsh, cold, voice rang out from the other end of the line:

"You are not in control."

She shivered. Trembling slightly, she leaned in.

"Hello. I'm the new chief of Police... I've come to request your services."

There was no answer, but the steel gate slowly began to creak open.

Kitty shuddered. She wrapped her arms around her chest and stepped forward. She had never felt more anxious: something about the chill of the wind and the gloomy atmosphere had her feeling rattled. Even before meeting the thing that she had come for. She bent her head over and trekked up to the house.

She slowly crept up the wooden stairs to the porch and approached the front door. She raised her finger to press the doorbell, but before she could touch the button the front door slowly began to open. She froze, unable to even breathe, as she stared into the dark abyss of the house.

She half expected something to come tearing out at her from the darkness, but nothing came. Somehow, that was worse. She desperately wanted to draw her gun, but she knew very well that doing so would almost certainly lead to her death. The Shadow did not like being threatened. She gulped, and took a tentative step through the door.

It slammed shut behind her. She yelped and took several steps forward into the darkness. Somehow, the entire room was pitch black. No sunlight made its way into the house at all.

"Hello?" She asked, her voice somewhat betraying her nervousness. "Ummm... I'm the new Chief of Police. It's nice to meet you."

She had to stop herself from screaming as a shape, more than twice the size of herself, stepped from the shadows. It was like something out of her movie: The glowing blue eyes of the beast were fixed squarely on her.

"I do not exchange pleasantries." The shape whispered. "What is your business here?"

She had to look away. She had to try and convince herself that she was alone in the house, and that she was talking to thin air.

"There is a woman living in town who fights like a demon." She whispered. "There is nothing that my men can do to stop her. She and her husband have already killed a good number of men, and have even attacked an acolyte of Ignis."

The thing let out a sharp exhale of breath. The force of it sent her hair billowing backward.

"I have no love for the Ignis." It said. "This woman... she intrigues me. Tell me more."

Kitty found herself relaxing somewhat. The initial danger had passed. Now they were negotiating for real.

"We know very little about her other than her name. Soleil Freeman. Maiden name: Blade. She-"

The monster let out another intense breath.

"Blade?" It whispered. "Blade, the vampire Hunter?"

"You've heard of her?" Kitty asked, taken aback. It had taken quite a lot of time for her men to dig up her identity, let alone who she really was.

"Oh yes..." It breathed. "I made her who she is today..."

It laughed. Kitty felt the strands of hair on her hand stand up on end.

"We need her killed." Kitty said. "I have full authority to grant you anything you wish in return."

"I want nothing."

Kitty's mouth tightened. The shape stepped forward.

"I want nothing but her blood on my hands..." He said. A large hand became visible. Kitty took a step back as it stroked her face.

"Nothing more."

"O-okay!" She chirped. "Um... do we need to shake on it, or-?"

The hand pulled back.

"Leave me." It commanded. Kitty was only too glad to go. The door opened on its own and it closed behind her as she hit the pavement. She broke out into a run down the driveway and back onto the street. She leapt the fence, and got back onto her bike.

She was relieved when she got away with no issues. Her heart was still racing in her chest. She had been terrified. The Shadow of Ignis had terrified her far more than Soleil Freeman had. Soleil, at least, had been human.

...

Soleil lay American down on their couch and fetched him an ice pack. After a brief moment's consideration, she also fetched Dante some meat. He ate, but clearly he was troubled. He sat gnawing on the flesh as he watched his master for any sign of movement.

"He'll be fine." Soleil assured him, as she scratched his ears. Dante whined and lowered his head away from her touch. He had been very brave fighting off those demons. If he had been alone he almost certainly would have been killed.

Unfortunately the same could be said for American. He had been too reckless. And now he was out of commission, this early in their life together here. He had gotten too used to the way things were in Indianapolis... Battles were disconnected from one another, and rarely had very much at stake.

They were not fighting a battle here: They were fighting a war. And he had given everything he had for a fight which, in the grand scheme of things, meant absolutely nothing. She doubted very much that Ignis Candypop was anyone of importance within the Ignis.

He had made a mistake, to be certain. And if she had not been there, he would almost certainly have been killed. And because they had still not found any new allies, she was stuck taking care of him until he recovered.

"In sickness and in health." She repeated to herself dryly. She replaced the ice pack, and upon further consideration, took the nearby armchair and moved it closer to him. She wasn't an expert at medical care: She could heal basic scratches and wounds, but under these circumstances she thought it best to let him recover naturally.

She glanced at the window. She knew that the police were waiting for them outside.

There were about six of them. Armed to the teeth with the surplus equipment of the U.S. Army. Machine Guns, riot shields... she half expected to see a tank.. She imagined that the government regularly tried to take the city back by force, only to be rebuffed and the equipment of their soldiers purloined and repurposed for the use of the police.

Although they had been waiting for them quite some time, they still had not attacked. Soleil suspected that the demons they had killed could have slaughtered this entire unit singlehandedly. These people were only here to support the real enemy they would send to face her.

The question was... who or what it would be would it be?

She sat in her chair, poised for action, half-doing, preparing for any signs of a break in. American had already secured the premises with a wide range of basic locks and barriers... nothing that a witch of Ignis couldn't break, but would at the very least deter the police. Dante was on edge: He seemed very aware that something was wrong, a fact that Soleil was grateful for. She was sure that he could protect his master in a pinch.

"This is the police." A blaring megaphone knocked her out of her reverie. "Come out with your hands up!"

Dante raised his head as she got to her feet.

"Guard." She told him. He looked at her blankly, but he did not move. She only hoped that he would do as she asked. She gave her husband one last once over before stepping to the front door.

She raised her hands and opened the door by magic. It swung open and she stepped through.

Immediately upon seeing her the crowd of cops opened fire. Soleil stood there as her aura stopped the bullets in their tracks. Bullet after bullet came within feet of her only to stop in mid-air and crumple to the ground. She stood, completely stony faced, as dozens of bullets were unloaded onto her.

And then, finally, the shooting stopped. Soleil stood there, hundreds of shells at her feet. She stared out at the police.

"Do you have a warrant?"

The cops froze. In most cases they would have laughed: They spit on the rights of American citizens every day. But in this specific instance... they were dealing with someone who could fight back. Like all bullies, they were afraid.

The woman with the megaphone raised it to her mouth and spoke again.

"Soleil Freeman. You are under arrest for the murder of-"

Soleil stared at the speaker and it exploded in her hands. The woman squeaked, jumping backwards as it fell to the floor, covered in flames. She stomped it with her heels, trying to put out the fire.

"You have no idea who you are dealing with." Soleil said quietly, as she advanced. She stepped past the doorway, and immediately the police unloaded on her again. Again her aura protected her. Bullets swerved to avoid her by the thousands as she advanced, slowly walking down the steps of the porch.

No... Our Porch...

She thought to herself. The thought, strangely, made her heart soar.

"Grenades!" The woman called. Immediately the men went for their waists and pulled out a number of explosives.

A dozen grenades flew to her at once, and each and every one exploded in her face. The police woman grinned, leaning forward.

"We got her!" She crowed.

The smoke cleared. The smile faded from her face in horror as the unblemished face of Soleil Freeman stepped forward, out of the smoke. Her face was expressionless. And when she spoke, every officer present felt only fear.

"You cannot defeat me." She whispered. The smoke around her began to swirl, obscuring her completely. Kitty froze up, her eyes

darting all over the place. She fingered her baton, half expecting the girl to attack at any moment.

But when the smoke cleared, she was gone.

The officers lowered their weapons, bemused.

"Where-"

She never got all of the words out. She let out a cry as Soleil's foot crashed into her from above. She slammed into the concrete and passed out from the blow. Soleil landed on her other foot and spun, her handguns spinning wildly along with her. Each officer whirled to face her, but their top of the line equipment was no match for her own weapons. Face shields shattered into pieces, armor was blown apart, and blood and guts was strewn all over the street.

When she came to a stop almost every single one of her opponents was dead. Only Kitty survived, her blood from her head seeping out into the concrete. Soleil turned her head around. Her first concern was confirming American's safety. No one had gotten past her, and Dante had not made any sound, so she was sure that he was still fine. Still, though, she found herself feeling a little concerned. There was no telling what had happened behind her back.

She stepped forward, back to the front door, when a cold voice hit her ears.

"Impressive."

She stopped. It was a man who spoke: One whose power was great enough to give her pause.

"Show yourself."

Something landed on the police car behind her. She whirled around, pointing her handguns at her new target.

It was a man, but she wasn't entirely sure he was human. He was large and hairy, his mane of black hair falling down across his back and to his waist. He wore no shoes, but what little she could make out of his physique was that he was shaped more like an ape than a man .

"Who are you?" Soleil asked, as she readied herself.

The figure straightened itself.

"Do you not recognize me, Mrs. Freeman?" He asked.

She lowered the weapon and considered him, her eyes narrowed.

Her mind was whirling. "You're the one who paralyzed my Mother's legs." She said slowly. She almost wasn't sure of herself.

"Correct." The man said. "I am Dr. Krueger. A pleasure."

He leapt down from the car onto the concrete. Despite the short distance, the concrete cracked under the force of his fall. Soleil stepped back, pointing the guns right at him.

He stroked his beard thoughtfully.

"You truly did not recognize me? I rather thought you would have a vendetta against me."

"I am not an agent of vengeance." Soleil said quietly. "I fight for good in the world."

"Clearly." Krueger sounded amused. "I heard that you battled Amaris Yew three years ago. Were you to fight again, today, I doubt that she would survive."

"And yet you still dare challenge me?"

The man bared his large teeth at her.

"The mark of a truly great leader is that men, more powerful than she, would die to protect her."

The teeth began to grow and elongate. She stood tall, watching him as he began to become increasingly wolflike. When his transformation finished, the werewolf bent down at all fours and glared at her with bestial eyes.

"You are a greater threat to my Princess than even the Brides of Dracula. I must put you down, as I did your Mother before you."

Soleil spun her handguns around her fingers and dropped them. They soared back into her leg pouch. In their place the hilt of a

sword sprung up. She drew it, revealing a gleaming silver blade.

They charged at each other. Soleil brought the sword back and slashed it towards his chest. The werewolf, with a burst of magical energy, arced his jump in mid-air and bounced above it, narrowly passing over her head. He spun around, raising a vicious claw, and brought it down on her neck. She fell to the floor, her legs splitting wide, bending her head over, to avoid the strike. Krueger growled, bent his legs, and again used magic to propel himself downward, with force.

Soleil pointed the sword upward jammed it into him. Her angle prevented any serious force being used, but the sword went straight through his chest. He roared in pain, biting and clawing at her as she brought the sword back down, cutting through his side. He rolled over in mid-air as he fell to the ground. Soleil spun, angling the sword to lop off his head, but Krueger angled his head and caught the sword with his teeth.

Soleil tried to rip it out, but it snapped into pieces. Krueger rolled over onto all fours and attacked. Soleil spun around wildly, and kicked him.

'AWOOOOOOOOOOO!'

He went flying backward. He hit a white fence belonging to one of their neighbors and soared right past, slamming into the house. The people inside who had been watching the fight yelled in fright.

"Leave us out of it!"

Soleil looked up at them, her face hard.

"This is our community." She said. "This fight is yours, whether you rise to meet it or not."

Krueger slowly pulled himself away from the broken wall, grimacing.

"Well said, Soleil Freeman!" He crowed. "I must say, your power surpasses that of your mother."

Soleil stiffened.

"I can still feel her bones breaking under my grip. She was so beautiful... before I was finished with her."

CRASH.

Soleil darted forward, slamming him further into the wall. Blood spurted out of his mouth and into her hair, but she took no notice of it. She raised her fist and hit him. He grunted with pain as his the bones in his neck cracked under the force. She brought her other fist back and hit him again, from the opposite side.

She did this over and over again. The monster was held so firmly by the structure of the house that he could not budge as Soleil's powerful fists clobbered him mercilessly.

"You think-"

PUNCH

"That you can-"

PUNCH

"Speak about my Mother-"

PUNCH

"TO ME?"

The wolf weakly tried to snap at her, but she punched it in the teeth instead. The powerful jaw of the beast broke under her blow, and the teeth snapped out of his jaw, impaling his own tongue, neck, and head from the inside.

Soleil barely knew what she was doing anymore: Pain and rage that she had been suppressing all of her life had exploded to the surface. At seven years old she did not have the power to make her enemies tremble, but at twenty she was a monster- one who would kill.

She whaled at him with nothing but her fists. His bones shattered under her precise, expert blows. She pummeled and slammed and destroyed his corpse. He had been dead for a long while, but she kept attacking him. Her anger, rage, and hate clouded her mind and

her judgement. She could not hear the crying of children around her and the demands of her neighbors to stop.

He was nothing but skin when she was finished with him. She had pummeled his bones and organs so thoroughly that his insides had become nothing but dust and liquid. She stared down at his corpse, wishing dearly that she could hurt him more.

"Get away from our house, you freak!"

She barely reacted when the plastic can hit her head, but it snapped her out of her stupor. She blinked, regaining control of herself, as she glanced upward.

"Diana!"

Soleil looked up to see a mother, looking horrified, wrapping her arms around her daughter. The girl was staring down at her, her teeth clenched.

"A curse upon you!" The girl cried. "The wrath of Ignis will be brought upon this place! You have doomed us all!"

The Mother pulled her away, and she was still shouting obscenities down at her. Soleil stood in the street, overwhelmed by the angry shouts that overwhelmed her.

"The Ignis will burn us all!"

"How could you?"

"Monster!"

Soleil closed her eyes and tilted her head upward. She wasn't sure how she should proceed. She was surrounded on all sides. She wasn't thinking clearly at all.

"Please understand." She said, her voice reverberating throughout the neighborhood. "I did what I must."

"You murdered me."

Soleil darted her head downward. The bundle of skin sat up. Its eyes had burst out of its sockets, so it stared at her with an haunting, ethereal gaze. She stiffened, her hand curling into a fist.

"Hear me, people of Ignis!" The thing cried. "This woman and her husband will destroy your very way of life!"

It fell limp. Soleil's trained eye could see a blue specter raising from the body. It winked at her and dissipated into the air. Soleil watched the place where it vanished, a sinking feeling welling up within her stomach.

Someone fired a gun at her. She was so rattled that she couldn't defend herself. It slammed into her shoulder and drew blood. She bit her lip, taking another step, and clutched her wound.

"If she bleeds, she can be killed!" A shout came from around her.

I need to get myself under control.

Soleil closed her eyes and tried to calm herself down through mediation. Her panic over what she had just done to this man was crushed by her sheer will to survive. Her aura flared, and the next couple of shots swerved away from her.

"Burn her!" A woman's voice shrieked. "Burn her!"

A blast of magical fire came her way. Soleil took a deep breath, calming herself down as her aura flared up. Soleil barely registered the flame as it slammed her in the face. If it had come from a properly trained witch, it likely would have killed her on the spot. But the sheer power of her own aura dissipated the thing before it touched her. The girl who had thrown it stared down at her, flabbergasted, as the flames exploded around her and turned into sparks, fading away as she stood though untouched.

Soleil finally found herself. She turned around and walked away.

She ignored the angry shouts and attacks as she made her way back to the house. She reached the front door, opened it, and then shut it behind her. She locked it, taking in a deep breath, and then collapsed, pressing her back into the door before breaking down into tears.

It was a while before she got enough of a hold of herself to drag herself to the bathroom and administer first aid. The bullet was still

lodged in her shoulder. She was so emotionally distraught that she had trouble precisely pulling it out with magic, so she had to do it by hand. She winced, eyes still a little wet, as she plunged in fingers inside her shoulder and pried it out. Once it was done she placed her hands over the counter, bent her head and broke down into sobs.

"Soleil?"

She stiffened. She looked up to see American staring at her in the mirror. She carefully averted her eyes to try and prevent him from seeing her.

"What are you doing up?" She asked. "Your injuries-"

"I'm fine." He rasped. He leaned his hand on the door for support.

"What happened?"

She hesitated. Her first instinct was to lie and tell him that nothing had happened. But she knew that he wouldn't believe her if she did.

"I lost control of myself." She said quietly.

American took a step forward.

"I lost control." Soleil said quietly, unable to meet his eyes. "I met someone from my past and I allowed anger to cloud my judgement."

She could sense the spirit of Dr. Kruger watching them. She could vaguely make out words that he was whispering in her ear, but she ignored them.

"I killed my enemy, but doing so has exposed us to the cult." She murmured. "The people living here believe the entire community will be burned by the Ignis Witches, in retaliation for what I did."

"These people were going to burn anyway."

Soleil looked up at him through the mirror.

"These are people who gladly send their sons and daughters to be sacrificed in order to maintain their lifestyles here." American said coldly. "Many of them we were going to have to kill anyway."

"But I-"

"These people willingly live as Cattle and blame you for their fate among the flames?"

Soleil froze, her lip quivering slightly.

"You're right." She said quietly. "You're absolutely right. But in the heat of the moment I-"

She stopped as he wrapped his arms around her from behind. The breath hitched in her throat and the words that were going to come out failed her.

"We came here to reform this society." American whispered, his voice soft and gentle in her ear. "It was you who warned me that they would resist change."

Soleil nodded. She found herself worrying about the blood on her. She had been so distressed that she hadn't even bothered cleaning herself up. She turned around and faced him. Their faces were so close that they were almost touching. American took her blood soaked hands and wrapped his fingers around them.

"There are good people among them." American said quietly. "But we must not feel shame about destroying our enemies- no matter the cost."

Soleil took a deep breath, and she felt her heart harden. She felt no sense of shame over letting her emotions get the better of her: It would never happen again.

She clutched American's hand in her own and looked up at him. They stared into each other's eyes, and for the first time he kissed her.

Soleil recoiled somewhat: She had never been kissed before in her life. But when she tried to push him away he simply held her closer. She felt herself relax. When they parted, she felt a strange longing.

"I'm sorry." She said quietly. "This was the worst possible time for me to make a mistake."

He laughed, and then kissed her again. She felt almost like she could fly.

"We'll work through it." He said. "I promise."

She nuzzled him, pressing her face into his neck. "Hm, I will have to hold you to that." Her voice came out in kind of a purr. She felt her face go red: she rather worried that she sounded like Amaris Yew.

"What should we do about the neighbors?" She asked. Now that she was here, with him, suddenly the threat of being exposed to the neighbors was a little less overwhelming.

"We'll have to win them over." He said. "They'll be forced to submit to us if we crush the Ignis."

Soleil wrinkled her nose.

"By the sound of it they were more concerned about real witches becoming involved." She said. "They've gotten used to living under Ignis occupation, but that doesn't necessarily mean they want witches in their neighborhoods."

"We'll need to be smart about this for sure." American said. "Surely some of these people will come around to our side."

Soleil nodded.

"We need to evaluate our neighbors." American said. "They can't all be followers of Ignis. Surely some of them hate them as much as we do."

"I agree." Soleil said. "We shall get started on that in the morning."

"But first..." American ran a finger across her bloody shoulder. "You need to clean yourself up."

She blushed.

"I was just about to before you came in." She said. "Um.... Could you set out a change of clothes for me?"

"Of course." He said.

She found her sleeping things set out for her in front of the door when she stepped out of the shower. They were neatly folded. She bent down, picked them up, and changed. By the time she stepped

out again, wearing her nightshirt and her pajama pants, she was rubbing her eye, exhausted.

She fell on her bed and passed out. Her emotional fatigue and the injury she had sustained had caught up with her.

In the other room, American looked at Dante.

"I guess it's up to you and me to hold down the fort tonight, buddy."

Dante let out a bark.

American rubbed his head tenderly. "Don't get too carried away now. We're sitting ducks here."

He glanced outside to see a crowd of figures in black cloaks gathering outside their property. They seemed unwilling to go past their white gate.

"We'll have to hunker down for a bit." He said. "If we lose you we won't have a single healthy fighter."

Dante bared his teeth, and nodded in agreement.

American closed his eyes and fell into a slumber. He was alert to any changes... every time that Dante nudged him he opened his eyes and went for his handgun. But it was never anything more than the crowd outside, growing increasingly large in number, throwing worthless objects at the home. There was nothing else for it: Until he and Soleil recovered, they could not go on the offensive.

Once he was sufficiently rested, he got up and began preparing an early morning meal. Soleil came into the kitchen, rubbing her eye.

"Bonjour." She said sleepily. She sat down at the table and American started on breakfast for them.

"How's your shoulder?"

"Fine." She said shortly. "It healed during the night. You?"

"My head still hurts." He admitted. "It may take me another day."

An accelerated healing process was one of the natural benefits of learning magic.

"What's the situation?" Soleil asked, her tone businesslike.

"Well we've gotten the attention of the cult." American said, tilting his head to the window. "They've stopped sending cops after us and have resorted to more extreme tactics."

The crowd outside, during the night, had singled out one of their own and burned him at the stake. His charred corpse was still standing there, facing their door as the flames consumed his entire body. It had been out there for quite some time- the flames seemed to be enchanted to never fully go out.

"Hm." Soleil said. "Things here are worse than I could possibly imagined. It seems as if the entire community enables this behavior." There certainly was a lot less outrage about the sacrifice than there was about her fight with Krueger outside.

American was forced to agree: Not a single person they had met thus far seemed to support the idea of driving the cult out of Ignis. They would rather the Cult continue the sacrifices and unhinged behavior than do anything that would upend their own lives.

"What's your expert opinion?" He asked her.

Soleil's lip curled.

"I'm not an expert on witches."

"Then give me your amateur opinion."

"My opinion would be that we would be better off if we just left these people alone." Soleil said. "There is no one here to save. Everyone is perfectly willing to bow to Ignis and take whatever scraps he throws their way. Or, I suppose more accurately, allows them to have. These people are sacrificing their own children, American... they are the lowest of the low."

"We can't give up on them." American insisted. "If we kill enough witches-"

"We haven't the numbers or the resources." Soleil said shortly. "Even now, we are pinned down here."

"We won't be forever."

"They haven't yet sent their best." Soleil pressed. "No. I don't believe this town is worth dying for. And you, I think, need to accept that."

American took the food he had prepared and set it on a plate. He set it in front of her. She thanked him, and began to eat as he sat down, facing her.

"The people allow themselves to be subjugated." She said. "If freedom mattered to them, they would fight back."

"Not everyone here is like you, Soleil."

She set the fork down and stared at him. He stared back, rather intently.

"They should be." She said quietly. "You should know better than anyone, American... when you left this place you acquired the power to strike down your enemies. There is nothing... nothing... that stops these people from doing the same. Other than a contentment with how things are here."

"Or, perhaps, a culture they fear they can't change."

"Do these people look like they're living in fear to you?" Soleil asked contemptuously, gesturing to the hooded figures outside. One of the people in black hoods had been thrown to the concrete in front of their house. It was a girl, perhaps seventeen or eighteen years old. She cried out, struggling as the men behind her stripped her bare and began to take turns raping her. American felt sick to his stomach as his hand reached for his weapon.

"Don't." Soleil cautioned. "Her father or husband should be the one to protect her. She knew what she was getting into when she came."

The girl cried out and threw her head back. American had to look away.

"You seem to have not quite grasped just what we're dealing with here." Soleil said quietly. "These people aren't being manipulated or controlled. They chose this. This is what they wanted. Our goal is not to liberate this culture... it is to destroy it."

American took in a deep breath.

"I don't like it." He admitted. "There can be no denying that we're surrounded on all sides by the enemy. But we mustn't assume that everyone is complicit simply by living here. I myself had no idea that this cult existed until after my parents had been sacrificed."

"Believe what you will." Soleil said quietly. "But it does not change the nature of this place." She finished eating and pushed the plate aside. "It was delicious, thank you."

She stood up and made her way to the door. Dante raised his head and watched her go curiously.

"What are you doing?" American asked, alarmed. "You're not going out there now, are you?"

"They're in our yard." Soleil said quietly. "I'm going to ask them to leave."

"But you're not-"

Soleil had already opened the front door and stepped outside.

The man currently having his way with the girl looked up at her, surprised, as she stepped down the patio.

"You're not welcome." She said. The man froze: She couldn't make out his face under the dark hood, but she was sure that he must be terrified. He had stopped mid-trust, and was still inside of the girl that he had pinned down.

She writhed slightly under him.

"Come on, is that all you got?" She asked contemptuously. "I could take hundreds of ya."

Soleil stepped forward. The girl looked up to meet her.

"Oh, it's you." The Witch said, her bright red hair lying on the concrete between them. "Does your husband want a turn?"

Soleil raised her leg and kicked at the girl's face. The man behind her wrapped his hands around her thighs and dragged her out of the way. She trailed her long fingernails against the concrete, scratching deep lines into them, as her hair left behind an intense trail of flame.

"You'll have to do better than to destroy me, honey." The witch said, as she smiled. Every one of her teeth were long and pointed, and her eyes had an evil, sinister red glow. She let out a moan again, as the man started to thrust back into her, and bent her head back onto the concrete.

Soleil looked at her with disgust, as the crowd of black hoods moved forward, murmuring vague threats in Latin.

"Burn in Unholy Flame."

"Burn in Unholy Flame."

"Burn..."

"Burn..."

"Burn..."

Over and over again. Soleil stood her ground, grimacing, as the people advanced. One raised his arms and lunged at her. She didn't even flinch as she drew her giant greatsword and swung. The man raised his arms wide as her downward strike cleaved him in two, splitting his entire body in half.

The girl cackled. "You are strong, girl. But nothing compared to a Hellraiser Witch!"

The man's body burst into flames. It towered high above his remains, and in its place stood a monster, teeth bared ready to strike.

Soleil swung the blade again and struck out at the creature. He reached out a powerful hand and tried to catch the blade mid swing, but the force Soleil used was too great. It cleaved through his arm as well, slicing it in two. It roared in pain as a burst of flame, rather than blood, shot out from the wound. Soleil stood there as the flames crackled against her. She flinched, pulling away slightly as the demonic flame enveloped her completely. It was only kept at bay by her aura.

"Rah!"

The creature went for another attack with its free hand, its claws outstretched intending to rip her into pieces, but a shot rang out from behind her and the thing reeled back. It snarled and looked past her, at the house.

American was leaning out of the doorway to their house, rifle raised, pointing it squarely at his enemy.

"I'll cover you, Soleil." He called. "Take out the most critical targets." She nodded.

Dante leapt out of the front door snarling. One of the cloaks went for him, raising a long silver sickle, but the Hellhound leapt upward and ripped his face off. The man was lying limply as Dante raised his hand towards his next target, and Soleil advanced again. Three men in cloaks cut off her advance towards the witch.

"Ooooh the whole family has come out to play." The red-haired witch said snidely. "Who's watching the baby?"

Soleil swung the great sword horizontally in a wide arc, slashing through all three of her opponents. Their upper bodies shot up into the air in a burst of flame, and began their transformation into their True Forms. Soleil stopped, and then swung the blade back around. The creatures, ten feet tall and burning with an intense demonic flame, fell by her blade in one quick strike.

The red haired girl looked up, clawing the concrete.

"Your powers truly are something else, girl." She said. She kicked her leg backward, and the man who was having his way with her was blown back, flying through the air until he slammed into the house across the street and exploded.

The girl arched her naked body and got up on all fours, rather like an animal, and bared her teeth. They elongated and became more like fangs. Her slender legs bent, and she sprung forward.

Soleil brought the sword down on her head but she narrowly dodged, snarling. Soleil stopped the massive sword mid swing and brought it back around, trying to catch the witch in midair.

"You handle this sword like a toy." She said.

Soleil dropped the massive blade. The size and weight of the massive sword was enough to leave a small crater in the concrete. Soleil brought up her leg and kicked, at an almost completely upright angle.

The blow caught the witch directly in the face, and her neck snapped backward as she flipped over. She slammed into the concrete with a crash, but in one fluid movement she grabbed the hilt of the blade. She shot into the air, blade in tow, and swerved wildly. She brought the blade up and tried to swing it. Soleil stepped backward, avoiding the clumsy strike, as the Witch tried to balance herself mid-air using magic to fly.

Despite hovering in mid-air, she seemed to struggle with the weight of the sword.

"How do you handle this thing?" She asked, as she gripped the massive thing in both hands and slowly tried to swing it. In spite of her clearly enhanced strength, even she failed to use it as effectively as Soleil had. "If your husband was half this big, I would have to take him for myself!"

Soleil glared upward at her.

"Please don't be crass." She said. "It's unbecoming."

The woman smiled at her, and arched her back, emphasizing her bare chest.

"What a prude." She said. "I feel for your husband."

A shot rang out. She cried out as she clutched her shoulder. American had just shot her with his rifle. The sword came crashing to the ground below her feet as she clutched at her heart.

"Bah." She said. "This isn't how I like to be penetrated." She held her finger out in front of her wound, and the bullet leapt back out. The wound closed almost immediately. "Perhaps it is you I should feel sorry for, Freeman. I barely felt it."

"Identify yourself." Soleil said. "Are you the High Witch?"

The girl flipped her hair back with her hand. "I am nothing but a humble servant of our lord and master. I am Ignis Daphnel... A witch of Ignis."

American fired a round at her. This time she caught the bullet in mid-air with her magic, and flung it right back. American withdrew into the house as the bullet moved straight through the door and into the room behind him.

Two handguns leapt into Soleil's pouch into her hands and she fired upward. The shots caught the witch unawares, and she had to swerve to avoid them, snarling down at her. American fired his own rifle, and the blast caught her right in the head.

Killing a witch in her human form merely forces her to take on her true form... the one resembling the master. The flames covered her entire body, burning away her skin and muscle and replacing it with demon flesh. Her limbs grew in size and power, and mighty batlike wings sprung out of her back. Her teeth sharpened even further than they had before, and massive horns sprouted out of her head. The flames dispersed, and she flapped her powerful wings, staring down at Soleil hungrily.

"You will regret this, human." She rasped. "I detest this form. It is not beautiful."

She flapped her wings, and an intense blast of air hit them. Soleil had to brace her foot against the ground, but Dante, who was keeping the remaining cult members at bay, was straight up lifted off the ground and thrown to the side, yelping wildly. The cult members, although they were standing some distance away, were also blown away.

"I will rip the two of you apart!" It snarled. American fired off a shot from the rifle, but this time the bullet simply bounced off of her toughened skin. American grimaced. His hand reached for the handgun at his side- the gun that his father had given him.

"Rah!"

Soleil leapt upward with her long, powerful, legs and grabbed the thing's clawed foot. It let out a surprised shriek as it flapped its wings furiously, trying to shake her off as it flew back and forth. Soleil gripped the thing's leg more tightly, and drew a bolas with her free hand.

The claw on the other foot slashed at her face and a deep cut was etched onto her cheek, but she was unintimidated. She brought the bolas around, swung it, and threw. The chain spun through the air, and wrapped perfectly around the witch's wings, restraining them completely.

The witch let out a shriek as she began to fall. Soleil quickly scaled the monster and wrapped her arms around it to hold her still, and then used her magic to shoot them both downward through the air. The Witch Daphnel slammed into the ground with tremendous force, splintering the concrete street into pieces.

Soleil leapt back out of the hole, none the worse for wear, and stared down at the damage she had caused. A clawed hand reached out for the concrete, and shakily tried to pull itself out.

"You're not human." Daphnel breathed. Her skull looked almost as if it had been caved in from the force of the blow. Both of her horns had snapped off, and she was missing several of her fangs. Her leg trembled as she crawled out into the street, and she lay flat on the ground, exhausted.

Soleil brought up her leg and stomped on her head. The witch screamed and struggled, trying to worm herself away from her.

"Do not doubt that I have the power to crush your skull in this position." Soleil said, her voice cold enough to freeze flame. "Now talk. How many of you are there? Who are your superiors?"

"I answer only to Ignis himself-" Daphnel sneered. "I'm a free woman."

Soleil cruelly dug in her foot further, and the demon's skull began to crack. The creature whimpered.

"There are other witches here." Soleil said. "Powerful ones. Greater than you. Talk!"

"I will."

Soleil froze. She raised her head and glanced behind her. The high, cold, evil voice had seemed to reverberate all around her. She could not pinpoint its location.

"Soleil!" American called. "Above you!"

Dante growled, turning his back on the crowd of cultists who all bent their heads towards her. Soleil whirled around, momentarily forgetting the woman under her feet, as she turned to face her new attacker.

The cloaked figure was dressed in a dark red robe that billowed wildly under her feet. She stood in mid-air, several feet above them, staring down with through a hood that covered her entire face.

"Who are you?" Soleil demanded, as the figure descended.

"It is my responsibility to keep the peace here."

She spoke much more rationally than most of the witches they had encountered so far, but Soleil knew not to be fooled. Hellraisers that ignored their most base desires were the most dangerous. It suggested a level of skill and intelligence that went far beyond the rampant hedonism of most of the lower ranks.

The witch opened her cloak, and an intense wave of flames shot forward. Soleil grimaced, as she crossed her weapons, focusing her aura to protect herself from the front. In spite of her best efforts, the intense heat and force of the flame penetrated her aura. By the time the attack let up, she was sweating. Slight burns ran up and down her arms.

"You are a mighty warrior." The woman said quietly. "If it pleases you, I would like to offer you a place among our-"

"No."

The witch stared at her intently.

"I ask you to at least consider."

Soleil gave her a small smile. "I will not even give you that."

The witch glared at her.

"That is a shame." She said quietly. "This makes us enemies."

Daphnel slowly got to her feet, panting.

"Daphnel." The witch said quietly. "Go home and rest. I don't want to see you in action again until your human form recovers."

"Boss, I-"

"Go!" She said sharply. Daphnel let out an agitated noise and opened her wings wide, and took off.

"Are you going to fight me next, then?" Soleil asked, as she drew a sword and brandished it, swinging it around.

"No." The woman said. "I am going to kill you."

She shot upward, growing to perhaps fifteen feet tall, her red cloak billowing wildly at her feet, and glowered at her as intense black orbs fired out of her cloak. Soleil felt her body being pulled towards them, looking to crush her into a ball.

"Black holes?"

She stepped forward, swinging the sword wildly in front of her to try and dispel the spell, but her hand spasmed, and the sword fell out of her grip.

Soleil grabbed her trembling arm and stepped backward, grimacing as the orbs came closer to her. She suddenly couldn't move her body. She could feel herself being dragged along into them.

Ka-shwing!

The balls disappeared. The witch looked up, surprised, as a figure clad in green descended from the sky in front of her.

"Hurting an innocent girl, Ramona?" The figure asked, sounding amused, as her emerald green billowed in the wind.

"Windsor." The Ignis Witch, Ramona, noted. She straightened, and although she did not attack again she was still very clearly on edge. "What is the meaning of this? Is this one with you?"

Soleil stared at the back of head. "Windsor?"

The woman straightened herself and smiled.

"No." She said. "But we share a mutual interest."

American leaned out of the window of the house, unable to believe it. Dante began to wag his tail wildly.

"It's Eilonwy!" He murmured to himself. He hadn't seen her in seven years. She looked just as he remembered her.

"Mutual interests?" Ignis Ramona repeated. "Whatever do you mean by that?"

Eilonwy smiled, but did not respond.

"I daresay you know what this means, interfering like this in my affairs." Ramona said. "War between Ignis and Windsor. My people, and yours. And unfortunately... you have no people."

"It seems like the war was already started without me." Eilonwy said cheerfully. "I am simply throwing my hat into the ring, as it were."

Ramona stared at her, and then slowly began to shrink down to her normal size.

"I cannot allow you to do this." She said quietly. "I am going to have to ask all of you to leave this city. Otherwise I cannot promise your safety."

American fired off a shot from the house. The bullet did not even reach its destination before it turned into a bird and flew away.

"No." He said, patting his rifle affectionately.

"If my husband isn't scared of you, neither am I." Soleil said. "And of course, the dog goes where he goes..."

"And there is nothing you can do to stop me." Eilonwy said, smiling.

"You sent the entire neighborhood after these people, and failed. What will the Nine think?"

Ramona bristled.

"This is war, then." She said softly. "I can see that your allies will not be deterred. I have no choice: On this day forward, there will be no holding back."

She floated upward, and exploded into a ball of flame, Sparks showered down between them. The woman was gone, but in her place was the great sigil of Ignis, floating in the sky above them.

"Well." Eilonwy said, as she looked up at it. "It begins."

She turned back around and smiled at Soleil.

"Are you well? Do you need any care?"

Soleil shook her head and took a step forward, but before she could question her further the front door to their house opened.

"Eilonwy!"

Eilonwy turned. American approached her, smiling wildly. She looked surprised for a moment, before her face widened into a smile.

"It's you." She said, sounding relieved. "American. And Dante too!"

She patted his snout, and he barked at her.

"You've grown so much!" She exclaimed, looking first at Dante, and then at American. Her gaze lingered a little bit when she met his eyes. "And well, too."

"This is the Witch of Windsor who saved you, then?" Soleil asked. She stepped in between them and gripped American's arm so tightly that he winced. Eilonwy stared at her.

"I am." She said cautiously. "And you are...?"

"Soleil." American said, his voice firm. "This is the woman who put me on the path I'm on now. We can trust her."

"You can trust her." Soleil said. "But I don't."

Dante growled. Eilonwy gently patted his nose.

"Do you want to come inside and catch up?" American asked her.

"We haven't spoken since I was a kid..."

"American!" Soleil said sharply. "She's a witch!" She seemed horrified at the idea.

"I know." American said shortly.

Soleil glowered at him. She was about to argue further, when Eilonwy shook her head.

"Perhaps we can simply have a little get together in your yard?" She suggested. "So you wife and I can get to know each other."

She gently patted Soleil's arm and she froze, looking downright murderous.

"That sounds great." American said. "Uh, but we're running kind of low on food. We'll have to-"

"Oh no no no." Eilonwy said quickly, as she opened her cloak. Her legs were somehow even more magnificent than American had remembered them. Her bag leapt out and burst open. A number of things, food, furniture, and drinks slowly teetered out. "Allow me."

When she turned to the house Soleil raised her hand and quickly slapped American across the face.

"What was that for?" He hissed, glaring at her.

"Do I mean nothing to you?" She hissed.

Before American could respond, Eilonwy turned back around to look at them. Soleil lowered her hand, as if nothing had happened.

"What would the two of you like?" She asked conversationally. "I have plenty of supplies... if you're low I suppose I can stock things up for you. I imagine you've been hunkered down here for quite a while."

Soleil looked mortified, but American agreed to this proposal.

The food practically prepared itself: Eilonwy sat with them as the meat set itself on the cutting board and cut itself into little slices, and slid into a pot of water. Vegetables sat to the aside, being seasoned by a floating shaker that hovered above, delicately giving

each piece an equal amount of flavor. Soleil watched the process carefully as American chatting amicably with Eilonwy.

"Why didn't you come to visit?" American asked, a little put out, as Eilonwy's favored green tea poured itself in three cups. Soleil did not drink hers, watching in silence as Eilonwy took a sip. "I missed you." Soleil turned her head to give him a hard look. He ignored her.

"I know." Eilonwy said, her voice heavy. "I wish I could have... but it wasn't in your best interest. It isn't a good thing for humans to mix too closely with witches." She smiled at Soleil. "This one knows that very well."

Soleil did not return the smile. She raised the tea upward and tipped it over, pouring it onto the grass. For the first time Eilonwy frowned.

"It's quite good, you know-" She began, but American thought it best to intervene before the situation escalated.

"You do yourself a disservice." He said. "I wanted to see you again." Eilonwy, clearly picking up on the fact that he was trying to salvage the conversation, quickly switched gears.

"That is very sweet of you." Eilonwy told him. "But you've seen the state of this city... I dared not leave it alone for even a day, lest the situation forever escalated beyond control."

"You care for the people, do you?" Soleil asked, her voice on edge.

"Of course I do." Eilonwy said, sounding surprised. "I am of the Windsor... a Noctis witch." She shook her head and sighed. "I do what I can for the people, but often my efforts are in vain."

American stared at her. He felt a strong feeling of affection for Eilonwy. She was just as he remembered her: Beautiful, kind, and intelligent. The only odd thing was that she did not seem to have aged. It dawned on him suddenly that she was actually a shorter woman than Soleil, and could easily pass as much younger than them both. He had no idea how old she really was.

"You mean... you save people like me all the time?" American asked, his voice quiet. Eilonwy smiled at him softly.

"I try to." She said gently, as she patted his hand. (Soleil looked murderous) "But as you've seen it isn't always possible. This town has ways of forcing the population to worship Ignis. In all of the years I have spent trying to rebel against the Ignis... I have made no progress. Until today."

"What?"

Soleil leaned forward, staring intently at her. Eilonwy nodded.

"You came back." She said simply. "Unlike all the rest that I led to freedom... you returned. And intent on destroying the Ignis. Most who realize what they would need to sacrifice in order to liberate this town give up before they even begin."

"What kind of sacrifice?" Soleil asked sharply.

"Not that kinds of sacrifice." Eilonwy said quickly. "No, I mean personal sacrifices... giving up your life, your dreams, you family in order to fight for the greater good. It is not something that the vast majority of the Cattle-" Soleil's eyes flashed, and Eilonwy corrected herself mid-sentence- "The people, I mean- are willing to do. You are a very unusual man, American. And it seems you have picked the ideal wife for this mission."

"More than ideal." American said. "She's perfect."

Soleil sat in a stony silence. Eilonwy giggled.

"I'm happy for you both." She said. "Oh, how I wish I could have seen the two of you get married..."

"We haven't had the ceremony yet." American told her. "We're waiting until we win."

"Is that so?" Eilonwy looked surprised. "I see..." She brushed her brown hair with her finger, curling it. "That may be a tall order, I'm afraid."

"We've already fought the Police, and the Cult." American said.

"What else is there? With your help I'm sure we can overpower the High Witch of Ignis."

"Ah." Eilonwy said. "Yes. That's just it. You don't understand."

"What is there to understand?"

"Things are worse than you imagine." Eilonwy told them.

"Hm." Soleil said. "We discussed that possibility. We are prepared to fight every Ignis Witch in the state, if we must."

"You are very brave." Eilonwy said. "But you fail to understand one critical point."

"Which is?"

"This city is now the center of Ignis worship across the entire world.."

There was a heavy silence.

"What?" Soleil asked. She got to her feet. "No. That can't be true."

"It is." Eilonwy said. "Ignis, one of the four elemental archfiends, has established the center of his religion here. All of his most powerful followers live among ordinary people here, in this town."

"Why?" Soleil exploded. She looked somewhat agitated. "What purpose could that possibly serve?"

"He believes that being summoned here, at his full power, with the full force of his most devout followers behind him, that he could destroy Americana himself and seize control of this entire country.

There was a dead silence.

"That would never work." Soleil said. "But tens of millions would be killed in the crossfire."

"Too true." Eilonwy said, as she sipped her tea. "Preventing Ignis' rise into this realm is of the utmost importance. The American government is aware of this plan, of course... but all attempts to subjugate this town with force have ended in failure, due to the state's inability to muster enough resources to reign them in. Americana will not bring the hammer down on this community as long as it does not remain a threat to its control over the country at large. But once Ignis is brought forth..."

"It'll be a cataclysmic disaster." Soleil murmured. "Perhaps a world changing one."

"I appreciate the fact that you understand the severity of the situation." Eilonwy said. "Please... both of you... I ask for your aid."

She bent her head.

"Wait a minute." American interrupted. "Are there any other members of the Windsor fighting with you?"

Eilonwy raised her head.

"They are on standby." She said. "Living quietly on the fringes of town. Preparing for the day that all hell breaks loose. Several of them I recruited into the coven myself, to protect them from the Ignis-"

Soleil let out an exasperated noise in her throat, as if she did not believe this at all, but Eilonwy continued as if she had not heard:

"But they are outclassed in both numbers and skill." She said. "My own power, although not insignificant, cannot turn the tides against the horde." Her face tightened. "There are times where I believe that it will simply not be possible to succeed."

American squeezed her hand reassuringly. (Soleil looked scandalized)

"We will succeed." He said. "We will help you!"

He shot his wife a look. "Right, Soleil?"

Soleil pursed her lips.

"If what she says is true." She said. "If."

Eilonwy looked at her. "Everything I have told you is true." She said. "Every word."

"But what haven't you told us?" Soleil asked, staring at her intently from across the table. "I know better than to trust a Noctis Witch."

Eilonwy tilted her head.

"Ah, that's right." She said. "I forgot something important."

Three plates landed in front of them.

"The food is ready." She said cheerfully.

Soleil looked furious, but American gave her a dark look. She fell silent, but was rather unhappy as the three of them ate. Soleil tried not to let her face show that she was impressed with the food show on her face, but American knew her well enough to tease her for it.

"If she hated it, she would let you know." He told Eilonwy. Eilonwy giggled, and Soleil found herself wishing that she were alone with American so that she could throttle him.

When they finished, the plates cleaned themselves of their own accord and they sat in the front yard in a comfortable silence.

"What's our first move?" American asked Eilonwy.

"Hm." She said. "Well, I think our first bet is to negotiate the terms of our alliance. The Freeman and the Windsor."

"No." Soleil said immediately. American turned to look at her.

"Soleil-" American said quietly, but Eilonwy shushed him.

"No, it's important to negotiate terms." She said, almost as if she were talking to a child. "We need to know where each of us stand on these matters."

"I trust you." American said. "We don't need to-"

"But your wife doesn't." Eilonwy said, her tone firm. "You should respect her wishes."

"Don't tell my husband what to do." Soleil said sharply.

American gave her a strange look. "You don't want me to respect you?" He asked, genuinely confused.

"That isn't what I said."

"Yes it is-"

"ENOUGH."

A intense burst of wind blew across the table, and they both had to flinch away from the force of it.

"Even the most trusted of allies need to set established boundaries, so both parties are on the same page." Eilonwy said. "Perhaps the same could be said for married couples." Her eyes flitted between the two of them. American looked embarrassed, but Soleil looked unphased. "This isn't a matter of trust, American. It's a commitment to uphold our alliance to achieve our mutual goals."

American let out a groan. "Okay, fine. What are the terms of our alliance?"

"Ultimately our mutual enemy is the Cult of Ignis." Eilonwy said. "It is an entrenched power that controls the entire city and the area surrounding it. The American government and the Church has no sway here. It is an anarchistic wasteland that puts on a façade of normalcy to lure in prey. And the People are regularly culled to feed the flames of Ignis for its sacrificial rituals."

"That's bad." American said, giving Soleil a look. She didn't laugh, her face was stern.

"Our goal is to bring together a group of people who can topple the Ignis." Eilonwy continued. "At the very least we need to guarantee that they cannot proceed with the summoning of their Master."

"How close are they to being able to perform the ritual?"

"Honestly, I do not know." Eilonwy said. "But I suspect it will happen in 2024... four years from now. On the day the Eclipse passes over this part of the world."

"This sounds like speculation."

"It is." Eilonwy confirmed. "But it is my genuine supposition, considering what we know."

"So you do not know what they are planning." Soleil said.

"That is a little harsh." Eilonwy said.

"Sorry." American said quickly. "We need allies to put a stop to this threat."

"Yes." Eilonwy said. "Anyone that we can find."

American gave Soleil a look. "Know anyone?"

She adjusted in her seat, sitting up a little straight.

"Well, the Bounty Hunters from the Company." She said. "They'll come down here if they think something is in it for them."

"Only if someone pays them to fight." American said darkly.

"Oh, leave that to me." Eilonwy said brightly. "I'll have my superiors post bounties for high profile targets. We'll pay you."

"Can you afford our prices?" American asked blankly. Eilonwy giggled.

"Her Majesty's Government can." She said cheekily. "Don't worry about the price. I'll take care of it."

"I don't know..." American said dubiously. Eilonwy cupped her tea in her hands as she considered them both.

"That being said, I want the both of you to please keep in mind that we don't necessarily need to destroy our enemies. It will be enough to accomplish our goals to simply disenfranchise them. More specifically... limiting their influence and power. Even something so simple as preventing sacrifices will do much for us."

It was incredible. Soleil and American had felt overwhelmed ever since they had come here. But Eilonwy somehow made it sound all so simple.

Eilonwy tilted her fingers sideways, and pen and paper shot out from her bag and began to scribble out a note to them, which slid itself in between American's fingers.

"Going forward we'll meet at my place." She said. "It'll be our Headquarters for this operation... You may find it of some interest, Soleil. Until just recently its only inhabitant was Dr. Bennet Krueger."

Soleil flinched. The weight of what she had done the night before still weighed heavily on her mind.

"We will meet again soon... Right?" American asked.

"As early as tonight, if you like." Eilonwy said. She began to rise from the ground and into the air. She tucked the bag under her cloak and gave one last look around.

"It truly is a lovely town." She said to them. "I must admit that I have grown rather attached to it."

And then she was gone. She darted across the sky like an arrow flying through the air. American watched her go, still smiling. Soleil gave him a dark look that he took no notice of.

"I suppose we better do what your girlfriend asks." Soleil said coldly.

"Huh?" He turned his eyes back to her and blinked. "Yes...we should get started."

He checked his weapons, and then the injury on his head. "I'm still not at 100%." He admitted to her. "How are you feeling?"

Soleil's head was throbbing.

"I don't feel my best either." Soleil admitted. "But if we go together, and with Dante..."

"Dattebayo!"

American looked up. A large black owl soared out of the sky and landed on their fence in front of them.

"Finally." Minerva said, as she twisted her head to the side. "I've been looking for you two!"

"Minerva?" Soleil repeated, nonplussed. "Where have you been?"

"Yes, well." Minerva said. "Sometimes you just see a rather handsome owl and spend a couple of days trying to build a nest with him. You know how it is."

Soleil and American gave her incredulous looks.

"We needed you here TODAY." American stressed. "We need intel on the area NOW."

"Yes, well. No harm done, right?"

American and Soleil gave each other exasperated looks.

"Look." American said. "We're both exhausted. We've spent an entire day fighting the police. Why don't you spend your evening looking into things? Like you were suppose to?"

Minerva looked unamused by the idea.

"I don't know... I'm pretty tired myself..."

She let out a loud squawk as American grabbed her and lifted her off the fence. She struggled vainly as American pointed her towards the street.

"I want a full report on the rest of the neighborhood. "Can you do that?"

"Can, but not-

"You will do it." Soleil interrupted her. "Or I'll speak to Diablo about your behavior."

"Okay, okay, fine." She said. "I'll do it."

American threw her into the air, and she did a flip before gliding down the street.

"Let's take a break." American told her. "Dealing with her is too much for one day."

Soleil nodded, and they entered the house.

...

Ignis Candypop twirled a finger through her long pink hair as she stepped up to the castle of Ignis.

"This better be important." She complained loudly. Being a born witch, she held more rank than the vast majority of the Acolytes that surrounded her. Girls, and a handful of boys with magical talent enough to become witches, were gathered at the base of the great Cathedral. A palace of darkness that was completely invisible to the naked eye. To the Cattle of the world, this was nothing but an empty field in the middle of the city that no one wanted to go near. But in reality, it was an enchanted fortress, home to the Highest Order of

Ignis Witches in the entire world. And someday it would be the home of Ignis himself, once he arose and conquered the world.

Candypop hoped that when it happened that they wouldn't have to gather like this to make grand plans for the future anymore. It never had anything to do with her anyway, really. She just wanted to chill out and have fun.

"Greetings, Coven of Ignis."

"Greetings Mistress." The bored voices of the Acolytes echoed back up at her. Ignis Ramona, the High Witch Ignis of Indiana, stood on the top of one of the Cathedral's high spires, staring down at her subjects.

"It is a pleasure to see all of you in good health." She said, her eyes flickering over the mass of faces and bodies. "There are those that were among your ranks that are no longer with us."

Who the hell cares? Candypop thought to herself idly. People died all the time. It was the way of the world. The old died and newer, younger, sexier people took their place. If anything it was a good thing.

"Our very way of life is being threatened." Ramona continued. "As we speak the United States Government is making moves to secure our land. No longer will you be able to live as you have. Our very way of life is in danger."

"And what's more..."

"A larger threat has surfaced."

Candypop snapped back to attention. A larger threat than the United States Government? What-

"The High Witch Windsor of Indiana, Eilonwy, has declared war on Ignis." Ramona said quietly. She has managed to secure a dwelling for herself and is attempting to unite our enemies to topple us all. If she succeeds it will mean the end of us all."

Windsor Eilonwy.... A name that all present were very familiar with. The witch of Windsor who had been fighting them tooth and nail for

years, with all of the force she could muster. And now, it seemed, she was willing to make a serious attempt at thwarting them.

"I have gathered you all here to inform that you very soon we will be going to war." Ramona said. "But do not despair: The blood spilled on both sides will hasten the return of our Lord, and if we prove victorious... why, it is possible that we can expand to control the entire world.

Eliminating the culture and people of the world was incredible appealing. What with their stupid rules and morals that existed just to stop people from having fun.

"But it is time to step up your training." Ramona continued. "One year from now I expect all of you to be fully fledged Ascended. No exceptions."

There was a moan of discontent among the crowd. Becoming a true witch of Ignis... becoming his servant, essentially... meant more responsibility and less fun. For girls who simply wanted to coast by on what others were doing, it was something that was to be put off for as long as possible. Being asked to rush their training and rush into ascension was too much to ask of them.

"No exceptions." Ramona said again.

"Maybe we should let the city be taken over." Candypop said loudly. There was a murmur of agreement.

She felt Ramona's hand on her shoulder, and she jumped. She hadn't even seen her move.

"An interesting idea." She murmured, as she trailed her hand up her neck and towards her cheek. "Are you in that much of a hurry to die?"

Candypop tried laughing it off.

"Oh, I was just joking." She said. "I mean, it's a tall order, to become Ascended. I mean, I was born a witch, so for me I think-"

Ramona ran her hand down her shoulder, across her arm, and towards her chest. She wrapped her hand around her right boob and

squeezed.

Candypop relaxed somewhat. It was a rather pleasant experience.

"I cannot let this matter go unpunished." Ramona said. " You see, this decision comes straight down from The Voice. I suppose I must leave this matter to her apprentice."

Candypop froze.

"A duel to the death!" Ramona crowed, to the crowd's cheers as she pulled away from her. "Survive, and you become a true witch of Ignis! But fail, and you die!"

Candypop could do nothing: She was pushed out to the front of the crowd of acolytes and stood tall , facing the cathedral doors. A feeling of horror welled up within her: A girl who was singled out to be an apprentice of The Voice was, in all likelihood, one that was being groomed to replace her, or even surpass her. This girl, whoever she was, would be extraordinarily powerful.

She waited with bated breath as she watched the black doors of the Cathedral.

"Well she's not coming." She said at last. "She's probably run scared-"

The doors burst open. Intense waves of flames shot out from behind them, covering the entire yard. Candypop screamed in terror as the fire surrounding her in a perfect circle, cutting her off from the other acolytes.

A cloaked figure stepped through the door and into the fire. The cloak caught fire, blazing wildly as she stepped forward, head bent.

"Ah, so the Apprentice shows herself." Candypop crowed, trying to sound more confident than she really felt.

"You bring shame to our name, acolyte." The other girl said. "I do not consider this a duel."

She reached for her cloak and ripped it off. The flaming fabric burned to ash as she revealed herself.

"This is an execution." Ignis Sinistra said quietly. The flames in her hair were burning at an intense heat.

"Her!" Candypop breathed, what little courage she had remaining failed her. She stepped away, backing away to the white hot flames cutting her off. She tried walking through them, as Sinistra just had, but found to her horror that the flames burned far hotter than she could handle. She had no choice. She had to fight.

She bent over and transformed. Both of her parents had been Witches. Although she was still considered an acolyte she was, in essence, still very much the property of Ignis. She took on his shape and stood there, on her hind legs, glaring intently at Sinistra.

She opened her mouth and an intense burst of flame shot out. Sinistra stood there and simply took it, the flames vanishing on the spot. Candypop felt her heart sink: Her most powerful fire based attacks would do nothing against a witch with so much more magical ability. She had no choice. She would have to get physical.

She leapt forward, claws outstretched, trying her best to tear Sinistra apart. She hoped, desperately, that her physical ability was nowhere near the level of her magical one.

Sinistra brought up her fist and shattered her chin. Candypop was thrown back, eyes widened, as Sinistra flew into the air, and raising both palms, made a number of furious swipes against her face and neck. The blows barely touched her, they grazed her face, but it rather felt like her entire head was being hit by a ton of bricks. She reeled back and forth with every strike, until finally she fell to the ground.

Sinistra landed on top of her, staring down intently at her face. Candypop quickly reverted back to her ordinary pretty self. It was time for her last resort.

"You know, you're pretty cute." She said, fluttering her eyelashes. Sinistra stared down at her. There was a look of contempt on her face.

"Dykes are disgusting."

She brought her leg up and smashed her head down on her face. Candypop cried out in pain as her face exploded into blood and brains as Sinistra, without a single care for the body of her opponent, stepped away. Leaving an intense flame behind to take care of the body.

"Very good." Ramona purred. "You have done well, apprentice."

She bowed.

"It was my pleasure." She said softly. "I hope that the acolytes have learned a valuable lesson from this."

The red strands in her hair began to settle into ordinary strands of hair.

"If not, perhaps another demonstration is in order."

There were loud protests from the crowd. One girl shouted out.

"When can I become Ascended?"

"The fact that you don't know says a lot about the lack of discipline in this coven." Sinistra said. The crowd fell silent. None of them wished to invoke her wrath.

"Please, Sinistra." Ramona chided. "We have had it too easy here for too long. Discipline comes with suffering. Once the fighting starts... you will see these girls become true warriors."

Sinistra bristled slightly, but offered no further comment.

"If they don't..." Ramona continued. "They will soon join their dear friend Candypop on the pyre."

She raised her head to them.

"Re-double your training and prepare for the arrival of the Master." She said sharply. "Lazing around will be punishable by death... anyone standing here who is not a witch this time next year will be killed."

The crowd of Acolytes funneled out of the yard, murmuring amongst themselves. They were unhappy, but they were already beginning to

accept what was happening. The good times were over. Today was the beginning of an age of conflict. It was do or die.

"How'd you like playing the disciplinarian?" Ramona asked her, as they turned and made their way back into the cathedral."

"It was a lot more fun than I thought it would be." She admitted.

"Work often is." Ramona said. "I merely wish more of them could see that."

"They just want to get high and have sex." Sinistra said, with some amount of disgust.

"Yes, well, most become witches to avoid having ordinary adult responsibilities." Ramona said. "A normal life is boring, as they say. I would say that you were no different." Sinistra's eyes flashed.

"I was nothing like them."

"I think you were."

Sinistra glared upward at her mentor, who was smiling sweetly down at her.

"You are not special." Ramona told her gently. "There are girls all over the state who grew up in similar situations to your own. Your true strength comes not from your past, but you desire to find fulfilment in your future."

"I became a witch at thirteen." Sinistra said stiffly. "I have more drive than most."

"For now." Ramona reminded her. "Do not be surprised if those around you begin to catch up with you. As you settle into your adult life your childhood trauma will fade. And with it, your rage towards the world."

Sinistra looked away from her.

"I'll never not be angry." She said coldly. "Never."

Ramona looked at her and noticed that the red strands in her hair had caught fire.

"Perhaps you too need to be disciplined." Ramona told her. "The witch who thinks herself invincible will not live long."

"I'm not saying that I'm invincible, I'm saying-"

Ramona raised her hand and she fell silent.

"It is vital you understand this." She said. "It has already been seven years... another seven and you will have been a witch far longer than you were an abused little girl. There will come a time where your past will not seem so important to you."

Sinistra's fire intensified.

"Are you mocking me?"

Ramona stroked the fire in her hair with her fingers.

"Of course not." She said quietly, as she stroked her head. "I'm worried that you won't live up to your potential."

The fire in Sinistra's hair slowly petered out.

"My potential..." She repeated. "Am I... a disappointment?"

"Of course not." Ramona said. "You are our future: The Voice knew it to be true the moment she met you. I have never trained such a natural born talent in the coven. But you will not be seen as one of the greatest if you do not grasp your weaknesses."

"My weakness..." Sinistra murmured to herself. The image of a young boy she used to know flashed through her head, and she threw it away. "I see."

"You became a witch because of your rage, but you mustn't use it as a crutch." Ramona said. "You must hone your other talents. You must prepare yourself to face all manner of opponents. There are those out there that would destroy you as you are now. If you were to fight them."

Sinistra took in a deep breath.

"There is one out there that I wish would destroy me." She said coldly, as she cast a dark look in the direction of the place where she grew up.

...

Soleil coughed. She raised her hand to her throat and gagged. American reached for her, concerned, but she waved him off.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing." She admitted, gritting her teeth.

"Your eyes are red." American said, gazing into her eyes. "You don't look well at all. Have you slept at all?"

She shook her head.

"Hey, Minerva!"

"What?"

Minerva flew into the room, and Soleil grimaced. The house would become littered with droppings and the remains of dead animals in a matter of days.

"Soleil can't sleep."

Minerva landed on the bed post and considered her, eyes wide.

"What do you want me to do about it?"

"Hypnotize her, stupid."

"Can't. I've been reading all day and my eyes are screwed up."

"Minerva-"

"On second thought she looks terrible." Minerva interjected, leaning into get a better look at her. "Stare into my eyes, sweet Soleil, and drift off into-"

Soleil collapsed onto the bed, snoring gently.

"That was easy." Minerva said, surprised, as she turned around to face him.

"How long will she be out?" American asked anxiously.

"Probably about a day." Minerva answered. "She's been pushing herself too hard."

"She has." American said quietly. "Because she had to do your job, Minerva."

Minerva ruffled her feathers.

"This again?" She asked contemptuously. "I don't have to help you, you know..."

"But you will."

She huffed and leapt up into the air, soaring gracefully and landing on the windowsill.

"Fine." She said. "I'll help you. I'll put off my romance, my family, my very life on the line for *you*, a boy that has never even considered doing anything nice for me in all of the time I've known you."

American gave her a look.

"Minerva we're paying you to do this."

"Don't remind me." She said snidely, as she took off out the window.

American closed the window behind her and, on impulse, decided to check that Soleil was still comfortable.

The doorbell rang. American looked up, surprised. It had been not been used at all since they had moved in.

"Could it be one of the company?" He had asked Gear to come down and reinforce some of the infrastructure of the home with his special brand of maintenance, but he hadn't thought he would come so soon.

American walked down the stairs, to the front door, and peered through the eyehole. He was surprised to see a little girl looking up at him.

"Give me food." She said.

American stared at her throughout the keyhole. There were a number of little girls in the neighborhood. A fair few of them were being raised by their parents to become Ignis Witches themselves. This one was named Marlene, and she lived alone in a house down

the street. It seemed that she was a ward of the neighborhood and wandered from house to house, asking people for food.

"Give me food, PLEASE." American stressed, hand on the doorknob. There was a hard silence.

"I haven't any food to give, fool." She said.

American rolled his eyes.

"When you want someone to do something for you, you say 'please.'"

"Open the door, please, and give me food please."

It was a start, American thought wryly, as he opened the door.

"Come on in." He said, as the girl came trudging in. She was caked in mud: By the looks of it she had been sleeping out in the open somewhere. Twigs and branches were clinging on to her jacket and pants.

"Why don't you clean yourself up while I make you something to eat?" American asked.

"Because I don't want to." Marlene said immediately.

"Wash your hands please."

"No, fuck off."

American ended up grabbed her by the hair and yanking her over to the sink. She fought and kicked, and even used some magic against him as he held her under the water sprayer and did his best to rinse her down.

"Unhand me, you pedophile!" She shouted.

"Please stand still." American said. "You're filthy."

It wasn't a great job... but it was something. At the very least he was able to scrub her hands clean with soap and water and rid her of several of the branches embedded into her clothes and hair. She sat at the kitchen table, dripping wet and scowling at him as he cooked.

"Thy hands shall be removed for raping me." She said.

He set the plate brimming with sausages, eggs, and bacon in front of her and she lit up. She completely forgot about her condition and ate ravenously, tearing into the meal with gusto. American watched her carefully.

"Did Miss Finch not feed you today?" Miss Finch was the crotchety old lady at the end of the street that screamed at passerby.

"She did." Marlene answered, with her mouth full. "But I'm still so hungry..."

"Don't talk with your mouth open." American told her. "Chew with your mouth closed."

"How?" She demanded. "'Tis impossible."

She finished up and demanded seconds.

"Say please." American reminded her.

"Please." She said impatiently, banging her silverware on the table.

The second plate he brought her was also devoured, but he noticed that she was struggling to choke it down.

"If you're full you can stop." American said.

"Not full." Marlene said stubbornly. She swallowed, winced, and then went for another. American leaned forward and took the plate away from her.

"Hey!" She said, giving him a dark look.

"You can come back when you're hungry again." American told her.

"We're not going anywhere."

She glowered at him, and then tried to get off the chair. She stumbled slightly and teetered.

"You ate too much." American told her.

"Nuh uh." She said. She gagged slightly, holding her mouth. She looked as if she was about to throw up.

"It's not healthy to overeat for every meal." American told her. "It's better to eat three smaller meals a day." She gave him a confused

look.

"Where would I ever get more than one?" She asked blankly. She wasn't trying to be obnoxious: She genuinely seemed to have no idea.

"Well you have Miss Finch. That's one. And you can come here.... So that's two..."

"I'll starve."

"We're not going to let you starve." American said patiently.

"What if there's some shit going down?"

"Like what?"

"Your house got attacked today."

"You should probably go to Miss Finch's house."

"What if she gets attacked?"

"Why would she get attacked?"

"Because she's not one of us." Marlene said bluntly. "She's like you... cattle." She teetered back and forth. "We don't like cattle."

"Why not?"

"Because you're dangerous." She answered. "If too many of you come to this neighborhood..." She waved her hands. "We all burn!"

American assumed there was some kind of quota as to how many witches could live among the cattle. They couldn't all victimize the same groups of people, otherwise they would wipe them out completely. So witches probably kept each other in check by fighting each other for territory and for the right to use the Cattle as a resource.

"I'm not the one responsible for the burning, Marlene." American said. "Ignis is."

"Don't be a retard." She answered him. American thought it best to change the subject.

"Does no one else on the street take care of you?"

"Nope." Marlene answered. If what she was saying was true, the Ignis wasn't taking care of one of their own. The fact that a child born to Ignis Witch was completely reliant on cattle to care for her said a lot about the local culture.

"Well we'll always be happy to help you." American told her.
"Regardless of what the cult thinks."

Marlene nodded.

"You're supposed to say 'thank you' after someone does something nice for you."

"Thank you." She said tonelessly, as if she had no idea what she was saying. "Uh, I want to leave."

She made her way to the door without waiting for American to show her out. American bid her farewell, but she didn't even acknowledge him. She was already making her way down the street and out of sight.

What a rude girl. American thought to himself, as he closed the door behind her. Soleil had told him about this: Hellraiser children were deliberately raised to be as antagonistic as possible. American himself felt that she had not been overtly averse to the idea of becoming more civilized... save the incident with refusing to wash up. No, a little bit of socialization would do wonders for her.

But that also led to the other issue at hand. Would he be made to fight the parents, and make the girl into an orphan? The thought distressed him.

And Marlene herself, despite being a born Ignis Witch, seemed fairly ambivalent about the cult, being more concerned with her own survival. The more time he spent in Ignis the more American was started to see the intricacies in the community.

His mind drifted to Eilonwy, and then to Soleil sleeping upstairs. What would they think? He would have to arrange a meeting between them, once Soleil was awake. He hated the idea of leaving her alone when she was out like she was. So instead he sat down and wrote down all of the information they had gathered that day.

It was long after he started that Minerva came tapping at the window. He let her in and she stepped in, ruffling her feathers.

"God I never thought I'd be happy to see you." She said pompously, as he set aside a bowl of water for her to sip out of. "This is a neighborhood of nightmares."

"It's that bad?" American had rather thought it relatively normal on the surface. Minerva nodded, her eyes wide as she gulp her water.

"This place is a wretched hive." She said.

"Of scum and villainy?"

"Nah, that's basic bitch shit." She said. "This is like... five levels beyond that." She pecked at her bowl and drank. "I investigated a good chunk of the city. I saw teachers raping their students, of sacrificial murders being conducted in the street, and worship of the elemental archfiend Ignis at home."

"We already knew about all of that though."

"It's beyond what you've seen here, in this neighborhood. And what's worse is that they're preparing for war. A lot of the kids that were groomed into becoming sacrifices are instead being trained to be soldiers."

"That's good."

"No, that's bad because that means that they're preparing to expand their territory." Minerva said. "God, you're stupid."

That lined up pretty well with what Eilonwy had told them.

"Does it look as if they are preparing to call forth Ignis himself?"

She tilted her head to the side.

"What a weirdly specific guess."

"It's not a guess." American stressed. "That's what we think they're going to do."

"Well you're right, for once in your life. I do think that. Calling Ignis here, on top of all of the firepower they've amassed, guarantees that they would be able to take the state, at the very least."

"Would they be able to take the country?"

She tilted her head.

"No, of course not." She said. "They're surrounded on all sides by people who would put a stop to it..."

Eilonwy had seemed pretty confident in that as well.

"The situation is going to get worse if we allow this to fester."

American said. "Allowing these people free reign will be a travesty. Minerva, I formerly would like to hire the company to come fight for us."

"The entire company? It won't come cheap."

"We're going to need all the help we can get to exterminate this hive."

Minerva sighed.

"More work for me, is it?" She asked gloomily, as she hopped up onto the top of the kitchen table chair to perch. "I'd rather sit at home and make nothing."

"It must be done."

Minerva opened her wings. "Do I have to?"

"Yes." American said bluntly. "Do your job."

She bent her wings.

"Very well." She said ominously. "We will fight for you."

And then she was gone. She did not vanish in the way she usually did, flying off through the window. No, this time she simply vanished, in an explosion of feathers. American stared at where she had disappeared, and then turned his attention to the matter at hand.

This was not a simple matter anymore. It seemed very likely that they would all be going to war. The thought was daunting, but he steeled himself. For better or for worse, this community would not be allowed to continue. Things would change. He would make them change.

And it all began with that first step.

...

The following day, American stepped out of the house to find the remains of a man lying on the street. His flesh had been entirely eaten away, and the bones left behind had been torn apart and chewed up. American bent over to investigate. Perhaps he could glean some information about the monsters that Ramona had under her command.

"That man is dead because of you."

American turned his head upward to a sullen Melanie staring at him. She was red-eyed and crying.

"How could you do this to us?" She asked, her voice hurt. "You have doomed us all."

"You have done this to yourselves." American said, his voice cold.

"You were quick to welcome us when you thought we would be offerings to your evil god. But now that you see us a threat, you fear us."

Melanie broke out into a sob.

"You have no choice." American said. "You must either fight for your freedom, or fly and start again. I will not allow you to continue living as you have."

"Who are you to decide how I live?"

American stood up. His aura flared, and Melanie let out a cry and fell down, staring up at him.

"I'm free." American whispered. He turned and made his way back to the house.

...

Soleil yawned. She let out a sigh as she stretched out a long leg on the mattress. She had not had such a long sleep in quite a while.

So long, in fact, that it took her a while to remember where she was. She sat up, blinking a little bit, and checked her surroundings. Oh. That's right. She was married.

"Someone's excited." American said to her, after she had gotten ready and come downstairs. She nodded at him, the small smile fading from her face, as she came over to see him.

"Has anything happened?"

"This thing is worthless." American told her, gesturing the paper. "If you believe that thing, Everything's sunshine and rainbows."

"Well you mustn't expect the paper to be honest." Soleil said.

"Governments use them all over the world to control the populace."

"Most papers have a kernel of truth to them though." American said. "Look at this."

He showed her an article that cited Ignis as the safest town to live in in the country.

"No one would be stupid enough to believe that."

"You overestimate the average person." American said. "This is the most popular small town for young couples to flock to in the state. If you're not going to a major city or out of state, you're coming here."

Soleil nodded.

"Yes, and then they are targeted by the cult or murdered."

"Oh, in rare cases... invited to join them."

Soleil looked at him. "Have you found a lead?"

"Yeah." He said. He tapped the article again. "One of the local churches is hosting a community dinner so that new arrivals can meet notable people in the community."

"A church?" Soleil repeated. Her eyes narrowed. "Here?"

"My thoughts exactly." American said grimly, as he folded up the newspaper. "We're new arrivals."

"I'll wear my Sunday best." Soleil said.

She was true to her word: She spent the entire morning getting ready. She came back down to find American waiting patiently for her.

"You look great." He told her, as he wrapped his arm around her.

"Thank you." She said softly. She led him to the door. "We should go."

She opened it, and was about to step out when American suddenly dove downward. Soleil let out a surprised squeak as she was lifted off the ground. A bolt of fear when through her: She angled her leg to kick out at his head. And then she realized what was happening.

"Oh." She said. She was being carried, bridal style. Automatically, without even thinking about it, she took her arms and wrapped them around his neck and nuzzled him. Her sandals had come slightly loose when she had been lifted up. They dangled awkwardly off of her feet.

He carried her out to the car. It was a strangely elating experience. She wished that it wouldn't end. She could sense their neighbor Melanie watching from her house, and she smiled to herself.

He set her down in the passenger seat and then made this way over to the driver's seat. She sat up, stroking her hair with her fingers as stepped inside.

"You've never done anything like that before." She told him.

"Well we haven't been married long." He said.

"That's true." She said, humming. She still hadn't gotten over the high of being picked up. "it was... nice. Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me."

"I don't?"

She straightened herself in her seat and composed herself. "My apologies." She said formally. American gave her a look.

"You don't have to apologize either."

"Oh. I'm sor-" She caught herself mid-sentence, and then fell silent. Perhaps it would be better for her to simply not speak.

"This will be the first time we meet people outside of the neighborhood, won't it?"

"Well, if you don't count Eilonwy."

"I don't." Soleil said bluntly. The high from the surprise was quickly wearing off. "We're dealing with locals today. Mind that you don't do anything stupid."

"Any suggestions?"

"The most important thing is that we don't play our hand." Soleil said. "We're going to observe the community. We mustn't pick fights we can't win. And we mustn't alienate those who may be our allies."

"That's right." American reflected. "Other families will be there."

"F-families...?"

Soleil blushed, and turned her face away from him.

They talked a little bit more as they drove, and spoke a little about the Church.

"Doubtless regular churches are allowed to operate here in some capacity." Soleil said. "But doubtless they too are complicit in the what happens here. It may be possible that these are shrines to Ignis, even if they claim otherwise."

"Someone not familiar with Christianity wouldn't be able to spot the difference."

"That's correct." Soleil said, nodding. "But I can."

"Alright. And I'll see to the other attendees. See if we can spot any potential allies."

When they pulled into the church's parking lot and parked their car, they found a familiar face waiting for them.

"Eilonwy!"

She waved at them with her free hand. The other was clasped around the hand of a little girl, perhaps four or five years of age. They wore matching bright green dresses with skirts that almost trailed the ground.

"Fancy seeing you here." She said brightly, as they stepped out to meet her.

"You didn't organize this, did you?" American asked.

"No, no, of course not." Eilonwy said quickly. "I come every year to meet with people moving here... to warn them of what's coming." She lifted her hand, tugging the little girl's arm upwards. "I first met this one here. Last year."

"A pleasure." The girl said formally, curtsying.

"Who is she?" American asked curiously.

"She is an acolyte of our Order-"

"Her little sister." The girl said sharply, as if correcting her.

Eilonwy smiled gently. "My little sister." She said softly. "Ripley."

The girl curtsied again.

"An acolyte, huh?" American asked. "So you're in training to-"

Eilonwy raised a finger to her lips.

"Not here." She whispered. She nudged Ripley. "You can trust these two." She said. A strange expression crossed Ripley's face.

"I don't trust anyone anymore." Ripley said quietly.

American thought it best to change the subject. "So Ripley." He said kindly, as he bent over to get a better look at her. "How many other sisters do you have?"

"Uh-" She cast an awkward look at Eilonwy, who smiled down at her encouragingly. "More than I can count."

"Next time someone asks you that you should just count all of the other girls at home." Eilonwy told her. "Madelyn, Annie, Poppy-"

"Oh, I see." Ripley said, nodding sagely. American smiled at her.

"Is Eilonwy your favorite sister?"

"Yes." Ripley said immediately.

"Shush." Eilonwy said, still smiling. She looked up at American and Soleil. "It would probably be for the best if you act as if you don't know who I am, whilst you're here." She said. "I am known, but the agents of the faith know better than to trifle with me. Best keep your distance, for now."

She gave them one last nod, her expression suddenly severe, as she tugged on Ripley's little hand.

"Let's go have some food."

Ripley shot one last look behind her, and American waved cheerfully. Soleil's expression was grim.

"That poor child."

America's smile faded as he turned to look at her.

"What?"

"She's been abducted by the Windsor." Soleil said quietly, her eyes still on them. "And is being indoctrinated into becoming one herself." Her tone was bitter.

American touched her shoulder and squeezed it reassuringly.

"Eilonwy seems to be taking good care of her."

"Do not be deceived." Soleil said quietly. "The Windsor are just as terrible as those they fight."

She turned to face him, her expression hard.

"It is vital that you understand this."

He raised his hand and cupped her cheek.

"Or maybe she's just a nice girl who likes kids." He said gently.

Soleil's eyes widened. She brought up her hand and swatted his hand away.

"Don't speak down to me." She hissed, her voice ice cold. American smiled at her.

"Come on, don't make a scene." He said. "We'll talk about it later."

Soleil was still glowering at him as they made their way up stone path, past the gate, and into the church yard. There were surrounded by more people than they had ever seen while in Ignis.

"How many of them are with the enemy?"

"A fair few." Soleil answered. "You should be able to tell simply by looking at them."

American nodded.

"I trust your senses better than mine."

"Other than when it really matters." She said snidely. She was still upset about the argument over Eilonwy.

Before American could answer, the two of them were waved over by a small crowd of people their own age. Soleil, ever the social outcast, fell silent as American led her over to the group.

"Where are you from?"

"I was born here." American said. "But I was living in Indy until I moved back."

"Really?"

"What about you?" One of the guys asked Soleil, his eyes running up and down her lithe body.

"She's from France." American answered. Soleil looked away from the group, her eyes scanning the surrounding area.

"Does she speak English?"

"Not to you." Soleil said immediately. American laughed, but the other man looked scandalized. During lulls in the conversation Soleil would point out the enemy around the crowd to American. His own senses were sharp enough that, once he was given a direction and a description, he was able to hone in on them with little effort.

"They tend to just get lost in the crowd." He murmured to Soleil, as attention diverted from them to other arrivals. "There are so many people..."

"One's noticed us." Soleil murmured. "Can you spot him?"

American turned his head and saw a man with a pompadour staring at them, arms crossed.

"Him?"

"Yeah." Soleil said. "Ah, he noticed."

The man adjusted himself and stepped towards them. He was older than they... perhaps in his late forties and early fifties. He was dressed in Priest's robes and walked with a dignified air.

"Hello, hello." He said warmly, as he approached them. "I haven't had the pleasure... I am Father Nicholas." His eyes met Soleil's. "But you can call me Daddy."

American almost drew his gun on the spot, but Soleil handled the situation than he ever could have.

"No." Soleil said bluntly. "You're disgusting."

The man blinked at her.

"Now don't be like that." He said reproachfully, as he stroked his hair with his hand. "You should consider my feelings as well-"

"How about our feelings?" American asked.

"Those don't matter much to me, I'm afraid." Nicholas said. "But you already knew that... didn't you?"

American lowered his hand to his gun strapped around his waist, but Soleil shook her head.

"Not now." She hissed. "Not in front of all of these innocent people."

"A wise decision." Nicholas said, folding his hands in front of him.

"You wouldn't want to make yourselves the bad guy in front of my church. God himself could be watching."

"I doubt that's ever stopped you." Soleil said icily.

"You're right. There is no God. Oops." He tried to hide his wide smile behind his hand.

"So this Church is a front for the brainwashing, evil cult that worships the Archfiend Ignis?" American asked loudly. A number of people surrounding them gave them odd looks. Nicholas' smile faded.

"I would watch your words if I were you." He said, his voice low and dangerous. "Who are you two? You come to my Church armed and ready for war. One would think that you are up to no good." His eyes glistened. "Americana is amiss if it believes that the two of you can liberate this... religious community."

"We're not with the government." American said.

"Oh is that so?" Nicholas asked. "Then let it be known, child, that even Americana himself can't overcome our defenses." His eyes flashed towards Soleil. "We haven't yet been... penetrated."

Soleil stared at him unblinkingly.

"Americana has bigger concerns than this town." She said. "You are nothing to him in the grand scheme of things."

"Is that what you believe?" Nicholas chuckled. "No... this community is the beginning of something far greater."

He was still staring at Soleil as he ran his hand over his crotch. He turned and stepped back into the crowd.

"I want to kill him." American said.

"Not now." Soleil said, her voice firm. "We must wait for the opportune moment."

She turned her head and caught Windsor Eilonwy watching them. Ripley stood off with a number of children, happily munching on a hot dog as she quickly made her way over to them.

"I see you've met Nicholas." She said quietly, her eyes looking wildly about, as if she were expecting to be watched. "Did he say anything to you?"

"He did." American said quietly. "Who is he?"

"He's the leader of this false church." Eilonwy told them, her voice in a dark whisper. "He's a sex fiend and a drug addict... he's a witch himself and devotes his time to carnal pleasure. He uses this Church to lure in women. Those he has no use for, he turns over the Ignis."

Soleil bristled. She had no reason to doubt Eilonwy's words. Eilonwy looked at her intently.

"You're a Christian woman, aren't you?" She asked softly. "I can see that you're angry... But you must believe me when I say this is the exact kind of evil that I wish to stop. Please... fight with me and we can put a stop to this together."

Soleil stared at her. She turned around and marched up towards the Church.

"H-hey-" American stepped after her. Soleil shook her head.

"Evacuate the area." She said shortly. "This ends today. At my hands, and my hands alone."

...

Daddy Nick bent his head over in prayer.

"Thank you Father, for creating sin." He snickered, as he patted the girl's head. She tried to hold back her tears as she was forced to take more of the oversized dildo down her throat. His real penis, which in his own opinion was even larger than the dildo that he had been walking around with in his pants, was being attended to by a second girl.

"Yo, Nick. Lot of girls out there today." Nick's friend was a man named Big Johnson. Known by regular Church Goers as the Black Bull, Big Johnson prided himself on defiling as many young girls as possible.

"Yes, it's the same every summer." Nick said. "They still think this is a real church." He pushed away the girl sucking on the dildo and she fell to the floor with a cry. "This one can go back in the cryogenic chamber."

The Black Bull bent over to seize the girl's arms. She fought and kicked, screaming wildly.

"I did what you asked! I did what you wanted! Let me go!"

"Shut up, bitch!"

The girl cried out in pain as Big Johnson smacked her upside the head. She reeled, her head swerving to the side, as Johnson grabbed hold of her body, steadying her unconscious body.

"Holes." He said, with disgust. "They think they should have rights."

The other girl was still furiously sucking his cock. Nick placed a hand on her hair and yanked her head upward.

"You go out and scope the congregation." Nick commanded. "Find me your replacement."

The girl immediately pulled away.

"Yes... daddy." And then she was gone.

"She's been unfrozen too long, Nick." Big Johnson complained, as the girl shut the door behind her. "Another week of this and she'll start getting ideas." He spoke as if the very idea of that was abhorrent to him.

The girl stepped out into the hall stony faced. The first thing she did was go into the bathroom and throw up. There was a special sink installed for this specific purpose. She rinsed off her face, re-applied her make-up, and stared at herself in the mirror. She clutched the sink with her fingers.

"My name is Isobel Carnell." She whispered. "I have been nineteen years old... for five years" She let out a deep gasp and bent her head. Her hand was shaking. She, and the other girls in the Church, were cryogenically frozen at regular intervals to preserve their youth and beauty. During the brief periods of time they were unfrozen they were endlessly raped, over and over again until Nicholas and Big Johnson tired of them.

The water in the sink was still running. She had left it on so that no one would overhear her rambling. It was becoming difficult for her

to hold back her tears.

"I can't be frozen again." She whispered. "I'd rather die..."

She took in a deep breath and tried to compose herself. She knew that the instant she failed to keep up a bright smiling visage to keep the new girls at ease she would be thrown back into the chamber. She shuddered, a feeling of deep shame and revulsion building up within her.

I... want to change.

She took in one last deep breath and steadied herself. She glanced at herself in the mirror and then stepped out into the hallway. She made her way into the public hall.

A gaggle of other girls who had come to mass were gossiping in the hallway. Isobel had never seen them before. They had no idea what was about to happen to them.

"Hello." Isobel chirped. "Are you new here?" She kept her voice light and friendly.

"Well... yes!" The girl said, surprised.

"Oh, that's amazing!" Isobel said, as she gripped her hand. "Not enough people come to church anymore... Look, you have to come speak to the-"

The door opened. An icy cold chill ran through the hall. Isobel froze, her smile fading from her face. All the senses she had developed during her training as an Acolyte were screaming at her to run away. The other girls stared at her.

"Hey... are you alright?"

She turned her head to the front door. Her heart stopped.

Standing there was a girl about her own age. Her hair was long and blonde, and she wore a bright white sundress which showed off her intimidatingly beautiful physique.

Isobel knew danger. And that girl was it.

The girl's eyes fell on her, and she started towards her. Isobel couldn't help it. She took a step back.

"C-can I help you?" She stammered.

"Yes." The blonde girl said quietly. "I'm here to kill the man called Nicholas."

The group of girls let out shocked gasps, and backed away, muttering among themselves wildly. Isobel was wildly shaking her head.

"W-wait..." She stammered. "I- I don't-"

"Don't lie to me."

Isobel gasped. She fell to her knees and bent her head.

"He's too strong!" She moaned. "No man who has challenged him can best him! He's a Witch, and has befriended a minotaur! If you value your life, please! Leave this place! He's-"

"As good as dead." The girl said shortly. Isobel looked up at her. Her bright blue eyes were staring down at her.

"You have no love for him." The blonde girl said quietly

Isobel bent her head.

"I... do not." She whispered. "He is vile and cruel, and I-"

"Enough."

Soleil turned her head to the other girls. "Take her and leave the building." She instructed. "You aren't safe here. You-"

"REHEHEHEHE!"

The girls let out a scream as a giant bat crashed through the stained glass window above them. Soleil stepped forward, glowering up at it as it flapped its wings, steadying itself in mid-air.

"You're a pretty one, hehehehe." The bat said. "Daddy would love to hear you scream his name!"

The girls wrapped their arms around Isobel and dragged her away. Her entire body seemed to have gone limp. Soleil paid them no mind

as she stared up at the creature with great dislike.

"Tell me." She said. "Where is Nick?"

"That eager to see him, are you?" It sneered.

It happened in an instant. Soleil drew a pair of handguns and fired: blasting holes in the thing's wings. It kept flapping, desperately trying to maintain its altitude, as she rushed forward, placing her weapons back in her holster and drawing a great spear.

"No, don't!"

She thrust upward, skewering him through the mouth. The girls screamed as the demon's blood was sprayed all over the church. Soleil threw it to the side, and turned to face the door ahead of her.

"W-wait!"

Soleil turned around to glance back at Isobel. Isobel struggled to find the words.

"Please... save the other girls! Please..." She broke down into sobs. The other girls, completely at a loss, bent down over her to comfort her. Soleil nodded once, and then turned back around.

She kicked the door open and advanced. A number of people looked up at her, alarmed, as she strode forward. Daddy Nick was standing on the podium, looking surprised.

"Now what's all this?" He asked. He adjusted his robes to emphasize the large bulge around the crotch area. "May I help you, Miss-"

"Mrs. Freeman." She corrected him. "I'm a married woman."

Nick's expression hardened. "Pity." He said. "Now, we are preparing for mass. If you must speak with me, you must wait until after-"

The crowd let out a sharp gasp as Soleil drew a massive sword. Nick sighed, and shook his head.

"Why do they always put up a fight?" He asked. He waved his hand.

Instantly a number of the crowd stood up. Men and women, surely those aligned with the Ignis, advanced upon her. Some of them were transforming into demons or monsters, and others had raised bright

red hoods over their heads. The innocent in the room screamed loudly. Soleil tried to keep her focus.

"Those of you who are innocent of any wrongdoing... step outside." Soleil commanded. "This is no Church."

A small number of people quietly stood up and made their way to the door. None of her enemies pursued them. All of their eyes were on her.

A number of her enemies dived at her. Whether monster or demon, none could withstand her blade. With one brutal swing she caught a number of them with a single blow. Screams filled the air as blood splattered across the pews. Daddy Nick stood watching, hands folded in front of him.

"You know." He said, as he began to step forward. "It's not too late to pray for forgiveness."

Soleil swung herself around in a full rotation and then threw the sword at him. It went spinning through the air, dangerously whirling towards him. He reached out a hand and stopped it in its tracks.

"My powers are greater than you may expect." He said, as the blade crumbled to dust. "Now, I don't want that to happen to your pretty face.... How about we chat over drinks, huh?"

She leapt and struck at him. He raised his hand, smiling serenely, as he tried to stop her fist. Only to recoil in surprise when she got past it and punched him across the face. He rolled across the floor, and slammed against the cross placed on the back wall.

"I told you, I'm a married woman." Soleil finished, as she got onto a fighting stance. Daddy Nick chuckled. The robes under his skin began to rustle.

"Do I look like the kind of man who would care about something like that?" Nick asked, as his neck began to widen. Wide, thick tusks began to sprout out of his mouth. Steely hooves burst out of his shoes. His clothes began to strain and tear at the power of his muscles. He was transforming into his True Form.

"I will destroy you, in the name of the Lord." Soleil said, as she got into a fighting stance.

Daddy Nick let out a dark laugh.

"If God were to strike me down, he would have to do it himself." He boasted. He raised his leg high and stomped it onto the ground, so highly that the ground shook.

Behind him, the cross hanging on the wall shuddered, and then fell. Nick didn't even get the chance to turn around as the cross landed squarely on his head, killing him on the spot. Soleil straightened her stance and stared at his corpse.

"Praise be to God." Soleil said quietly. The bodies of those she had killed lined the pews, and the stench of blood filled the air. She felt a strange sense of revulsion: She was sure that at some point this had been a real church. How many people had come here, seeking salvation, only to discover what it truly was?

She turned away from the altar and walked to the door. She had barely gone twenty steps when a loud thumping sound came from behind her. She turned, eyes narrowed, as the wall behind the cross once stood broke down.

A minotaur, perhaps ten to twelve feet tall, towered over her. It leered down with an intense glare.

"Dammit, girl." It said. "You just killed my best friend."

It lumbered towards her, its large powerful legs cracking the floor with each step. Soleil stepped back, her eyes fixed squarely on it.

"We've known each other since we were kids." The minotaur complained. "I always let him have my women after I was done with them. We were closer than brothers."

His stride was so great that he easily closed the difference between them. If Soleil kept moving back, she would hit the opposite wall. She stopped in the middle of the aisle, staring up at her enemy with great contempt.

"We were just having fun." He said. "Why did you have to go and ruin it, woman?"

Soleil glared up at him.

"You call this fun?"

He lunged at her. A powerful palm wrapped around her as she leapt up, neatly landing on his arm. She pushed herself forward, and then punched his face.

"Ooof!"

He was so powerful that the blow did not impact him much. Instead of flying across the room, like she had hoped, he simply gave a grunt of pain. Soleil leapt back onto his shoulder as he raised his hand and tried to swat her aside like an annoying fly. She drew a sword and slashed at his neck. It shattered upon contact.

She leapt off of his shoulder and back onto the floor. The Minotaur turned to look at her.

"They call me the Black Bull." It said. "Do you know why?"

Soleil had to stop herself from grimacing: It wore no loincloth, and she could clearly see its penis standing, fully erect in front of her.

He dashed at her, and Soleil leapt up. She drew one pair of twin swords and swirled around. She used her magic to slide along the floor as she slid under his legs. She swiped left and right over and over as she cut the penis into ribbons.

The creature roared as she came to a stop and turned around. She leapt back and slammed her weight into its back, sending it sprawling. She did a flip in mid-air, drew a rocket launcher, and pointed it downward.

The Black Bull exploded into pieces. She landed on the ground, standing among his remains. Her own perfectly white dress was completely clear of blood, but she had landed right in it. She wished she wasn't wearing sandals.

"I-is it over?"

She looked up. The girl from before, Isobel Carnell, had stepped into the room, looking around nervously.

"Did... did..."

"I did."

"Oh thank god."

Again she fell to her knees. Soleil made her way over to her.

"Do you know where the other girls are?"

Isobel nodded.

"Y-yes..."

"Lead me to them." Soleil demanded. Isobel hesitated, her eyes flickering about.

"Y-you got them all, didn't you?" She asked, nervously. "They.... Can't do anything to me anymore?"

Soleil's expression softened.

"No." She said kindly, as she bent down to help her up. "It's time for you to start worrying about other people."

Isobel nodded, her expression sad, as they walked, arm in arm, down the aisle and to the room in the background. Isobel showed her the secret doorway to the basement, and Soleil kicked it in. The alarm system went off, but it went ignored as they descended. If any demons remained in this place, none wanted to try their luck with her.

They came to a stop in a vast chamber. Rows upon rows of girls lay in caskets of ice. They stood, their eyes frozen shut, as they waited in silence.

"What is this?" Soleil asked, appalled.

"A cryogenic chamber." Isobel answered, her voice bitter. "They kept us here to preserve us when we weren't being used."

Her voice sounded so choked up. "You don't age while frozen in there, so..."

There were, perhaps, about two dozen girls here, frozen in place. Soleil checked their names and identifications. A number of them came from interesting backgrounds. Acolyte witches, a vampire, and a knight of the Order of the Dragon.

"Can we just let them out?" Soleil asked. "Is it safe for them?"

"Well, yes." Isobel answered. "It's just..."

"What?"

. "I'm sorry... it's just..." She wiped at her eyes. "I don't think any of us can get over what has happened. None of us... none of them will be able to live normal lives after..."

She trailed off, shaking her head wildly. She was hysterical. Soleil noted grimly.

"It will be hard." Soleil said. "But it must be done."

"At least... let's have something ready for them to eat when they come out... okay?"

Soleil smiled at her. "Okay."

They stepped to the first chamber and opened it.

No. 001...

Catherine Prey

The girl let out a large gasp as the cryogenic chamber opened. Isobel and Soleil both stepped forward to help her out, but she immediately swatted them aside.

"No- stay away from me! No!"

"It's alright." Soleil said soothingly, as she struggled to restrain her. The chill coming from the cryogenic chamber made her skin harsh to the touch. "You're in safe hands-"

"No..." The girl moaned, her eyes fixed squarely on Isobel. "I won't do it! I won't! I-"

Isobel broke down into tears. Soleil suddenly had to calm them both down. She forced Catherine to the ground and held her, her voice

calm and relaxing, as she assured her that everything was alright. It took a very long time for her to calm down. Isobel was still sobbing herself when she was finally ready to speak.

"What year is it?"

"2020."

The girl shook. Clearly, like Isobel had been, she had been frozen for so long that entire years of her life had been stripped from her.

"Isobel, would you like to escort her back upstairs, or-"

"No." Isobel said, wiping away her eyes. "I-I need to help them out. And... repent... for what I did."

Her eyes met Catherine's. They were still wet.

"I'm sorry."

In the end they sat on the floor and cried as Soleil opened the second chamber by herself. This one was for a witch.

"Salutations." The woman rasped. Unlike Catherine she seemed none the worse for wear. She stepped out of the cryogenic chamber and considered her. Her light blue eyes seemed oddly cold, and her stiff blue hair did not budge as she bent her head towards her.

"I am Elsin Jillian." She said. She turned her head to the side observing all of the other frozen girls. "Truth be told, I felt safer in there than I do out here."

"Yes, well, I wasn't going to let you stay in there forever." Soleil said. "I'd rather you be out here, where I can keep an eye on you."

"Noted." The witch said dryly. "I hope you understand what you've done to me. The Ignis are my natural enemy. I cannot survive here in their climate. If you would, please escort me North, to my native Canada-"

"You have a lot of nerve making demands of me." Soleil said coldly. Jillian gave her a cool look and stepped back towards the cryogenic chamber. She leaned against it and took in a deep breath, and closed her eyes.

Quite a few of the next several chambers were human girls... these she was a lot more tender with, and eventually Isobel recovered enough to help her with them. They sat, huddled together for warmth, as Soleil moved on to the next chamber.

It was a vampire. She stared at it, desperately wishing that she could justify simply leaving her here to rot.

"What is it?" Isobel asked, a little bit timidly.

In normal circumstances she would kill the vampire on the spot. But in this situation she felt the need to question her about the Ignis. Against her better judgement, she released her.

The black haired vampire sauntered out, hand to her head.

"Food..." She moaned. She threw herself at Soleil, her arms raised. Soleil raised her fist and punched her stomach. Isobel gasped as the vampire thrust her head forward, feigning pain- she was headed right for Soleil's neck.

Soleil thrust her weight forward and threw her to the ground. She pinned her to the floor, and she stared at each other.

"This isn't how things are supposed to go." The vampire said sultrily. "Usually I'm the one on top."

"Funny." Soleil pressed her weight further onto her neck. "I don't feel the same way."

"Agh- stop, stop." The vampire complained. "You're hurting me."

"That's the idea."

"Soleil-"

Isobel stepped forward and placed a hand on her arm. Soleil did not push her away, but she stiffened somewhat.

"She hasn't done anything to us." Isobel said. "I've... I've done worse than she has."

Soleil looked up at her.

"You mustn't take pity on a vampire." She said. Despite her words, however, she relinquished her and got to her feet.

The vampire lay where she was, her mouth wide open.

"Blood-" She moaned. "I need... Blood."

"What you need is a stake in your heart." Soleil said.

The girl moaned, placing a hand on her forehead, and then sat up. Her long, wild black hair fell across her shoulders in waves. Her rather beastly eyes were warm and hypnotic.

"The name's Goneril Blackbell." She said. "I'm a student at Grey Arcadia... or at least, I was." She let out a loud, exaggerated yawn.

Her eyes fixed squarely on Soleil and she licked her lips. "Sorry." She said. "My lips feels a little dry. I need something warm to- loosen them up."

"You're fortunate that I'm showing you mercy." Soleil said. "But I will not allow you to feed either."

Goneril grimaced.

"I haven't eaten properly in months." She murmured, placing a hand on her mouth. "They only allowed me to feed when I was giving them blowjobs..."

She gagged somewhat. Soleil didn't budge. Goneril was trying to present herself as being as much of a victim as anyone else here, but she was a vampire. Her very nature dictated she would exploit other people, no different than Nick had.

"You can feed off of me." Isobel offered. "It's... the least I can do..." She pulled her hair back to expose her neck.

Goneril gave her a glance.

"You've been tainted." She said slowly. "You wouldn't satisfy me."

Isobel's hair fell across her neck. Her shoulders fell.

"I see." She murmured softly. "I'm worthless, then."

"No, don't say that." Soleil told her sharply. "You've been a big help."

"Have I?" Isobel asked quietly.

Before Soleil could answer, Goneril had slyly made her way over to the other groups of girls. Soleil had to leave Isobel behind to tackle and then restrain her. She procured a thick, enchanted chain from her pouch and tied her up with it. Goneril glowered at her.

"Kinky." She said.

Soleil pushed her over, and she fell to the ground, cursing wildly at her. The chain, enchanted as it was, would prevent her from transforming into smoke, and would weaken her strength.

"You're going to starve me." Goneril called after her. "You haven't saved me. You've doomed me. To the worst fate a vampire can--"

Soleil ignored her. She squatted down next to Isobel.

"Are you alright?" She asked her kindly. She still had not moved: she was still sitting on her knees, staring down at the floor.

"No." Isobel said bluntly. "I'm no use to anyone. I'm better off dead."

"Come on." Soleil cajoled. "I wouldn't have been able to get the chambers open without you."

Isobel shook her head, seemingly rejected her claim, but she allowed her to help her to her feet.

"I know it's hard for you to believe." Soleil said quietly, as she gripped her hand. "But you are doing good in the world."

She patted her arm and she led her to the next chamber.

The final chamber was the one with the Lady Knight of the Dragon. Soleil released her, and she climbed out of the chamber gasping for breath.

"My lady." The girl gasped. "Are you... with the Order?"

"I'm sorry." Soleil said quietly. "I'm Catholic."

"Ah." The girl stumbled, but Soleil dove forward to catch her. She thanked her, clutching her tightly. "Regardless, I thank you. This means more to me than I can possibly say. I am Dame Celia Rosenbaum." Her eyes flickered over to the gaggle of girls. "Are any of my sisters in arms among them?"

"No." Soleil said. "I found no others."

Celia sighed. "I suspected as such." She said gloomily. "I suspect they would rather die than be taken prisoner by that man." She blinked, trying to get her bearings. "They served the Ignis, yes?"

"That's correct."

"Where are we then? Germany?"

"No. You're in the United States."

The girl blinked.

"Really?" She murmured, sounding a little taken aback. She seemed to be struggling with what question to ask next. "Forgive me, but what are your names?"

"I'm Soleil Freeman." Soleil said. "I'm a vampire hunter."

"And you?" She addressed Isobel. Isobel looked taken aback: Clearly she had not expected to be addressed.

"I'm..." She clicked her fingers together. "I'm just another victim... call me Isobel."

"A pleasure." Celia said, nodding. "Ah... I feel a little woozy... perhaps we can talk later...?"

"Soleil?"

Soleil raised her head. Her husband was walking down the stairs, blinking in the light.

"Is everything alright?" He asked, as he approached them. "We saw a couple of demons fleeing the Church--"

"I handled it." Soleil said. "We're just cleaning up."

"Are you?" American asked, as his eyes ran over her still bloody dress and shoes. "Your clothes are a mess."

Soleil flushed. "I've been busy."

"Well Eilonwy and the other Windsor witches are securing the area." American said. "If you're all done down here... Why don't you get cleaned up?"

"I-"

"That's a good idea." Isobel interrupted, as she took Soleil's hand. "We have a shower room, come on... I'll wash your things for you while you get cleaned up."

Soleil was led away in spite of her protests. American smiled at her, and turned his attention to the crowd.

"We have food." He told the mass of starving girls. "Come on upstairs."

"What about me?" Goneril demanded, as she kicked her legs violently as the other girls trooped upstairs. Celia Rosenbaum stopped on the steps next to him as she glanced back at her.

"We probably shouldn't just leave her down here." Celia told him. "If she breaks free she'll corner someone and kill her."

"We'll seal the chamber back shut." American said. "And have Soleil deal with her when she's ready."

He and Celia followed the others up into the church proper. Tables and chairs had been set up in a basement room, and the Windsor witches were levitating an entire banquet inside, and setting it down.

"You went above and beyond." American said, impressed. Eilonwy turned his way and smiled.

"You should have married me instead." She said, as she directed the floating containers of food with her finger.

"Don't let Soleil hear you say that." American warned her. "She'll tear you apart."

"Marriage is sacred." Celia interrupted. Eilonwy shot her a look and frowned.

"And you are?"

"I'm Dame Celia Rosenbaum." Celia said. "Of the Order of the Dragon."

"Celia, darling, you should have a seat. You look as if you're about to collapse."

Celia swayed slightly.

"I am." She admitted. "But I know better than to trust a witch."
American turned to her, frowning slightly.

"Celia, she's our friend." He said.

"Then you are a fool." Celia said immediately.

"She's just like your wife." Eilonwy said, sounding amused. American laughed.

"It's fine, Celia." He said. "There's plenty of people here who aren't witches... I'm not one. Why don't you sit with me?"

She looked a little bit apprehensive at the idea, but nodded, her face stony.

They moved to an empty table on the other side of the room. Celia sat down across from American and folded her hands in front of her. American could tell she was exhausted, but maintained a certain dignity and poise that reminded him a lot of his wife.

"Who are you?" She asked.

"I'm American Freeman... Soleil's husband. I'm trying to liberate this community from the Ignis."

"A tall order." She murmured. "But an admirable one." She brushed her orange hair behind her ear. ". I detest the Ignis as much as you."

"More, I would think. Considering what has happened to you."

Celia shook her head.

"It is a Knight's duty to suffer for the sake of the world." She said. "I was captured by the Ignis in battle.... Because I was taken, others were spared my fate. There is no higher honor than that."

She seemed resolute, but American knew that she was simply putting on a brave face.

"If there's anything we can do for you... please let us know."

"Thank you." Celia said quietly. "But all I wish now is to see the Ignis destroyed."

"Here comes the food!" Eilonwy called. Instead of the guests getting up to go get it, the food came to them. Shiny white plates danced in mid-air in front of them, and soon every person in the hall was sitting in front of a steaming meal.

American sat and watched as Celia devoured the plate in front of her. She stopped, embarrassed, but he shook his head.

"Eat." He told her. "I know you've been through a lot."

"My apologies." She murmured. She didn't speak again until she finished her first plate. Although a second set herself in front of her, she seemed a bit more in control of her eating. She tried to make polite conversation with American.

"What happens now?" She asked. "Not everyone here is a fighter... and not everyone is trustworthy."

"We'll have to find a place for them." American said. "Or..."

Before he could finish his thought, Eilonwy floated over to them.

"Is everything to your liking?" She asked politely.

"Yes, it's wonderful, thank you." American answered. Celia did not look at her.

"May I join you?" Eilonwy asked. Before they could answer, a chair shot out from a spare table and set itself under her. She sat, smoothing out her robe and stared intently at him.

"You were right." She said. "I would never have dared take this place on my own, but Soleil managed splendidly."

"You were intending to take this place?" Celia asked. "For what purpose?"

"To save you, of course." Eilonwy said immediately. "Isn't that right, American?"

"That's right." American agreed. "Eilonwy told us what was happening here and how important it was to liberate this building. When Soleil heard, she just came charging over here like a maniac. I couldn't stop her."

"You didn't try to stop her." Eilonwy teased.

"Yes... well." American said. "It needed to be done, and I knew she would be fine."

"Soleil's an amazing fighter." Eilonwy told Celia. "Isn't she?"

"Hm." Celia let out a half-hearted response. "She must be, if she beat Big Johnson on her own." She fell silent. "I couldn't do it." She said, after a bitter pause. Eilonwy tried to pat her hand, but she shirked it away.

"Ah, here she is." Eilonwy said, as Soleil and Isobel came through the door. They spotted them, and made their way to them. Soleil had changed into a bright blue top.

"It's mine." Isobel explained, upon noticing American's expression. "I couldn't get the blood out of that dress..."

"Monster blood is difficult to clean off." Eilonwy said sympathetically as the two chairs shot towards them. Soleil chose to sit next to American, and Isobel chose to sit next on Soleil's other side. Two fresh plates shot towards them. Soleil glanced at hers but did not eat. Isobel, however, looked on at the plate with longing.

"You're... a witch?" Isobel asked hesitantly, eyeing Eilonwy with an apprehensive gaze.

"I am." Eilonwy said, preening. "And you are...?"

"My name is Isobel Carnell..." She said. "Um. What are you doing here? What do you intend to do?"

Eilonwy smiled.

"I'm here to stop the Ignis." She said. "I think... all of us sitting at this table have that in common."

There was a very hefty silence. The five people all looked at each other.

"It's true." American said heavily. "All of us have our own stories for being here, and yet we all want the Ignis destroyed."

He surveyed the room with an analytical gaze. "A fair few of the girls you freed are fighters, Soleil. They may make powerful allies."

"Perhaps." Soleil said, a little bit coolly. "But after what has happened to them, it will be a long while before they are up to doing anything."

"I agree." Isobel said softly, her hand gripping Soleil's arm. "I'm... still thinking about what's happened. All of this... it doesn't feel real to me. Especially since..." She gulped, looking a little bit apprehensive. "There are far more powerful witches in this town than those who used this place."

They all looked at her.

"What do you know, Isobel?" American asked.

Isobel grimaced. She wrung her hands in front of her and stared at her half eaten plate.

"Well Daddy..." She coughed, rolled her eyes, and let out a disgusted noise in her throat. "Nick was a witch, that much is true. But he wasn't a particularly well liked or respected member of the Ignis."

"I can't imagine why." Celia said dryly. Isobel let out a dark giggle.

"Well... I'm just saying... now that he's gone... what's to stop his brethren from coming down on this place and taking it for their own? If we're in no condition to defend ourselves, then-"

"Oh, that's no trouble." American said. "Soleil will do it."

"Huh?" Celia blinked.

"I will?" Soleil asked blankly.

"If you can help them fortify this place and keep it secure... the girls can live here and make this place their own."

Eilonwy tapped her hand on the table.

"American is right." Eilonwy said. "We need to start splitting up and taking more of an offensive. We need to recruit new allies, and protect those who would be willing to fight for us." Her eyes

glittered. "Soleil, You're the only one they can completely trust. It has to be you."

She fell silent. She stared down at the table, her lips pursed.

"They need you, Soleil." American told her. "You're the only one who can prepare them for whatever's coming."

Soleil still did not look convinced.

"Your husband won't be alone." Eilonwy said. "I'll be with him, if it makes you feel more comfortable."

Soleil glowered at her, but before she could respond American shook his head, silencing her. Isobel leaned forward.

"Soleil..." Isobel gripped her arm. "We DO need you here."

"If we're going to be living here, we're going to have to have some peace of mind." Celia said.

The five of them looked at each other.

"It's decided, then." American said. "Soleil will stay here and look after you."

"If I must." Soleil said.

"We can convert this place into a kind of women's shelter." American said, looking around the hall. "A place where people can go to prevent themselves from being sacrificed..."

Soleil was staring rather intently at him now.

"Yes..." She whispered. "That... is a good idea. These aren't the only people that need rescuing, do they?"

She stood up, placing her hands on the table.

"We should see if there are any usable beds in the building."

Celia smiled and got to her feet.

"The Freeman Women's Shelter... I like it." She said.

Isobel stood up as well, shaking slightly.

"I-I'll do whatever I can." She breathed. "J-just give me the word."

Soleil gave a look towards American.

"No letting strange women in our house." She told him. She drew a knife and slammed point first in the table in front of Eilonwy.

"Especially this one."

Eilonwy smiled. She placed her elbow on the table and leaned over, placing her chin on the back of her hand.

"You don't have anything to worry about, sweetie." She said. "I have no interest in your home." Soleil gave her a dark look before walking away. American turned to Eilonwy.

"What are you going to do next?"

"Me?" Eilonwy repeated. "I haven't decided on our next target... But I think it may be the school."

"The school?"

"Yes." She purred. "If churches are the center of Ignis recruitments for young adults, the schools are the center for children." She gave him a knowing look. "I have a girl enrolled there named Windsor Poppy. She has observed how the Ignis recruit from the Cattle there."

American closed his eyes, remembering the face of Miss Ignis.

"I think so too." He murmured. "Does the name.... Miss Ignis mean anything to you?"

"Oh, all of their recruiters all call themselves that." Eilonwy said.

"They think it's cute."

"She was a young woman... fiery red hair... a musician..."

"Ignis favors redheaded women." Eilonwy said. "You've probably just described half of his rank and file."

Celia played with her own orange hair self-consciously.

"She taught at my middle school." American continued. "She was my homeroom teacher... I'd recognize her in a heartbeat."

"Is that so?" Eilonwy inquired. "Perhaps Poppy will be able to help you. She's at the school now: I'll let her know that you're coming."

American nodded and got to his feet. "I'll be heading out then." He nodded at Isobel and smiled. "Take care of my wife for me, okay? I'll be back to collect her when you all are settled."

"Y-yes..." Isobel said, alarmed.

"Affirmative." Celia said. "We will be awaiting your return."

...

The boy sat on top of the roof of the school building, staring out over the horizon. A discarded pack of juice lay next to him on the concrete.

He had just walked out of a class. The teacher just let him do it. No one stopped him. No one cared. And as a result... he was bored. The Ignis just let him do whatever he wanted, and there was no thrill in that.

"A penny for your thoughts?"

Ichiro looked up. Standing there on the side of the building was a smiling girl in green. She was about his age, with long blonde hair that was tied up in two different tails that trailed all the way down her back. He had seen her around several times over the past week, and more than once their eyes had met.

"May I join you?" She asked conversationally.

The boy gave her a look. "You don't go to school here, do you?" He asked her.

"I do now." She said cheerfully. She moved and stepped up beside him. "I'm Windsor Poppy... I'm here to destroy the Ignis."

The boy laughed.

"It can't be done." He said. "Why would you? If you tried they would-"

He stopped. The gears in his head were turning.

"They would try to stop you..." He said slowly. He curled his fingers into a fist and punched his other hand. Poppy was staring at him, her eyes falling on the baseball bat strapped to his back. "Do you... want to fight them too?" She asked, a little cautiously.

"Sure." The boy said. "If you'll go on a date with me after we're done here today."

"Deal." She said, clinging onto his arm.

They turned and made their way down the building.

"I told you my name." The girl said brightly. "What's yours?"

"Ichiro." The boy said. "Takemura."

Hardly anyone was in class: The only people who took school seriously here were desperately trying to transfer into any other school in the state. Drugs were out in the open, fights broke out on the regular, and girls openly bragged about flings with their teachers.

"This reminds me of a saying." Poppy said, as they watched one girl make out with three different guys in a hallway. "In today's degenerate society the only way left to rebel is to be a good person."

He gave her a look. "I like that." He said. She smiled at him.

"There are others like us." She said. "We're not alone. We just have to find a place where we belong. That's all."

"I think I know how." He said. "Follow my lead."

Poppy went with him as he approached the girl and her three boyfriends. The girl stopped, and looked up at him.

"Get in line." She said rudely.

"I'm not into sluts." Ichiro told her. Poppy let out a reassuring cooing noise, and leaned her head into his shoulder. The slut stared at him, her expression hard. Her boyfriends all looked at her.

She snapped her fingers and immediately all three of them advanced towards him. Ichiro stared at them coldly.

"Fuck off." One of them said. He raised his hands tried to shove Ichiro. Ichiro shoved back, and the boy went flying. He slammed into the wall and slumped over, unconscious.

The slut screamed in rage as the other two advanced. Ichiro fought them both at once, knocking them to the ground. The slut stood up, drawing a long knife from her pouch, and leapt at him, blade raised. Poppy grabbed her arm.

"A lady never fights." She told her, sharply. The slut barely knew what hit her as the air was pulled directly from her lungs. She gagged, falling face forward onto the floor, unable to breathe. Poppy stared down at her, smiling serenely as she turned back to face Ichigo.

"What exactly was the purpose of this?" She asked.

He held out his hand to her and she took it, wrapping her fingers around his.

"I thought you were prettier than her." He said.

Poppy bounced up and down on her heels. "Ooooooh, did you?" She purred. "Thank you!"

A woman stepped towards them. Her severe eyes glinted dangerously behind her horn rimmed glasses- problem glasses. She was a sadist who took pleasure in torturing kids whenever she had half an opportunity.

"That will be enough of that." She said sharply. "Both of you will be sucking cocks in detention tonight-"

Ichiro grabbed her by the scruff of the neck and slammed her head against the locker. It shattered the metal upon contact, shattering her skull into pieces. She was killed instantly. Poppy, who had been screamed at by this woman more than once over the past week, cheered as her limp body fell to the floor.

"The age of the Ignis is over." He growled, shaking her limp body wildly. "Anyone who wants to fight for them... better step up now."

His eyes ran over the crowd. Instantly a boy wearing a trench coat reached into his side pocket and pulled out a glock.

BAM BAM BAM BAM.

Poppy raised her hand, and the gun's bullets stopped in mid-air. The boy froze, his eyes wide, as his now empty gun clicked helplessly as Ichiro advanced towards him. With one brutal swing of his arm Ichiro clobbered him to the ground.

"Who's next?" Ichiro challenged, turning around to face the crowd of people who had come out to fight him.

A girl dressed in a bright red hoodie shot towards him: The fire erupting from her feet propelled her like a jet engine. She screamed in rage and fury as she went for a tackle.

CRUNCH.

Ichiro slammed her into the ground with a punch, catching her completely off guard.

He glared upward, his eyes glinting. "This school..." He drawled. "I hate all of it. I hate everything the Ignis has done to all of you."

Another witch let out a cry and hurled a fireball at him. Poppy stepped forward, and with a wide sweep of her cloak vanished it into thin air. The girl grimaced, and braced herself.

"You are of the Windsor, yes?" She rasped. "You are foolish to come against me."

Poppy stepped forward, eyeing her intently.

Poppy smiled at her with a tranquil fury. "Foolish? For not simply standing by and allow you to destroy yourselves?"

The girl braced herself, taking a small step back. Poppy held her arms forward and focused her magical energy. The girl fired her own aura, and they clashed in mid-air.

It wasn't even a contest. Poppy's powers were so much greater that they completely overwhelmed the other girl's. She let out a scream

of pain as she was blown backward, into unconsciousness. Poppy raised a single finger upward as she took a step back.

"Let that be a lesson to you all." She said. "Ignis promises you the power to take whatever you want... but never forget that others are also given that same right. This freedom that you use to oppress others will be used to oppress you-"

"They too, will be crushed."

Poppy froze. She turned around.

Standing there in the doorway to the room was a woman with wild red hair. She surveyed them with an almost bored expression. Poppy took a step back.

"Be wary of this one." She told Ichiro quickly.

"I know." Ichiro said. "That's Miss Ignis."

Miss Ignis stood around the crowd of frightened children and frowned. She stepped forward, her heels clicking along the floor, and advanced towards them.

"So this is how you use your freedom." She said, clicking her tongue. "To take away the freedom of others."

She came to a stop in front of them. She breathed out, and an intense burst of smoke erupted from her nostrils. Poppy took a step back, and Ichiro stepped in front of her, his fists raised.

"Identify yourself, witch." Ichiro growled, gripping the bat in his hands. "Who are you?" His intense aura radiated off of his body in thick, blue waves. Poppy turned to look at him, a little taken aback. His natural power was abnormal.

Ignis watched him carefully, her glasses glinting.

"Ichiro Takemura." She said. "Together with a Windsor Witch... is this a declaration of war?"

"No." Ichiro said. "This is going to be a massacre."

Miss Ignis threw back her head and laughed.

"Oh, you always were a riot, child." She said. "It's always been difficult to control those born with true power... You, Ichiro, very well may be the strongest to ever set foot in these halls." Her eyes flashed at him. "But that does not mean you have the right to challenge us."

She pointed a long finger at him.

"You are a threat to our freedom."

Ichiro glowered at her. Poppy stepped up behind him.

"Our Master has a saying." Poppy said. "The Ignis have become slaves to their own freedom. Doing whatever you want has led to a culture where no one does anything that isn't to her own benefit."

Miss Ignis glowered at her.

"Spoken like a true slave." She said. "Diana."

A girl from among the crowd stepped forward. Miss Ignis gave her head a little pat and stroked her hair as she turned to face them.

"Prove yourself." Ignis said. "Fight the boy."

Ichiro glowered at her.

‘If you think I won’t hit a girl, you’re sadly mistaken.’

Diana stepped forward. She ran a hand through her long black hair and threw it back.

“Heed, mortal.” She said pompously. “Your flesh will be burned to ash and your blood will be feasted on by the crow-.”

She barely had time to react as Ichiro lunged towards her.. He swung a fist at her, and she narrowly ducked. Diana growled, and curled her hand into a fist. An intense burst of flame emanated from it, and she struck forward, straight towards his chest.

The Ignis Fire Fist is a martial art designed to take full advantage of the demonic fire of the Archfiend Ignis. The idea is to harness the intense flames of the creature and condense them into a hyper specific way, resembling the intensity of a blowtorch. This approach led to even light taps being able to burn through bone and tendons, and to increase the speed and power of strikes by using the intensity of the flames as a sort of jet propulsion system. Even in an amateur’s hands, it was a style that could easily overpower even trained fighters.

She was not prepared for what she was going up against.

Ichiro reached for his back and pulled out the metallic baseball bat he carried around with him everywhere.

Ichiro swung the bat at her with incredible force. She raised her hand and tried to slice through it with her hand. The bat melted at her touch. She lunged forward, intent on taking Ichiro’s heart, but he swung the bat back around. The melted metal flung into her eyes and she cried out in pain, staggering around wildly.

“Stupid girl.” Miss Ignis hissed, as Ichiro took the remains of the bat in one hand and grabbed her with the other. Diana flailed about helplessly as Ichiro smashed the handle of the bat across her face. She crumpled like a sack of bricks as Ichiro pulled back, tossing the handle of the bat aside. A boy standing idly by, holding a knife was hit in the face, and he too recoiled.

Ichiro stood tall, his aura rolling off of him in waves as he stared down Miss Ignis.

"You've always been strong." Miss Ignis commented, as she looked at him. "But you've never fought us like this before." She floated forward, her heels leaving the ground. "What has changed?"

Ichiro glowered at her.

"I met a girl."

"A girl?" Ignis repeated, laughing a little. "Surely you don't mean the Windsor?" She spoke contemptuously. "Windsor Eilonwy will be crushed... along with her allies."

She charged towards him. Ichiro raised his hands and tried to stop her, but she pummeled him with a flaming fist. His aura barely managed to protect him as he was thrown back. Poppy let out a cry and leapt forward, spinning wildly in circles, an intense barrage of wind erupting from her. Her spinning rotations led to the birth of a miniature tornado. People screamed as they were slowly dragged into the vortex.

Miss Ignis stood there as the tornado wrapped around her, and at an incredible speed tried to rip her apart. Ignis raised her hand, and fired a single fireball down into the eye of the storm.

"Agh!"

It was a direct hit.

Poppy fell backward, her tornado dissipating in seconds. Her eyes wide.

"You are very inexperienced." Miss Ignis told her flatly, as she slammed into the ground. "You thought that you could simply overpower me... But I am an Ignis Witch! I will not be so easily destroyed!"

Ichiro glanced down at Poppy. He did not move to help her up.

"Get up." He hissed. Poppy shakily sat up and shook her head.

"Her power is incredible..." She murmured. "She's fought our kind before." She lifted off the ground and landed lightly on her feet. She swayed slightly, shaking her head to re-orient herself. "Perhaps she is too much for us."

"I cannot simply just let you leave." Ignis stated, her red hair billowing behind her. "No... you both will be made an example of."

Poppy took a step back.

"Ichiro." She said. "We can't win. We have to leave-"

"No."

Poppy stared at him, her eyes wide.

"A man doesn't back down from any challenge." Ichiro said. "I fight until I win."

Miss Ignis threw her head back and laughed.

"What a pigheaded boy!" She said.

She kicked her leg back. An intense jet of flame shot out from it. She shot across the room and lunged for Ichiro. He tried to stop her, as he did last time, but without his bat he didn't have the range he needed. She cut in between his uppercut and swerved, punching him across the cheek.

This time the blow burned a hole right through his face. He tried to defend himself, bringing up his fists to block, but this time he was dealing with a true master of the Ignis Fire Fist. She darted around at all angles, propelled by the intense flames, slamming into him with her fists, elbows, and knees. Ichiro felt his flesh burn away every he was hit. He tried not to scream as she attacked him.

"No!" Poppy screamed. "S-stop!"

She raised a hand and shot a magical blast at her. Ignis turned around, and raised her hand to fire back.

"Raaaaaagh!"

Ichiro lunged forward and grabbed the witch's leg. Miss Ignis let out a cry as she was swung up and over the boy's head. The shot meant

for Poppy narrowly missed her head as Miss Ignis was brought down, slamming into the ground.

The woman grimaced, and an intense heat emanated from her leg, catching Ichiro square in the face. He didn't even flinch as he pulled her back up and slammed her down again.

The intensity of the flames increased as Ignis tried to force herself away from him, but Ichiro took the flames, barely even flinching, as he swung her back and forth, faster and harder. The flames from Ignis increased in size and ferocity, to the point that the school itself had caught fire.

By this point the crowd had dispersed out of fear and panic. Poppy stood among the panicking people, coughing slightly, as the smoke and flame began to grow.

"Ichiro!" She screamed into the flame. "If you keep this up you are going to die!"

The attack continued. Ichiro did not stop his assault, and Miss Ignis did not stop spraying flame everywhere. The room caught fire in several different directions, and soon enough Poppy was using her powers to blow the smoke away so that she could breathe.

"Ichiro!" She screamed. "Ichiro!"

Ichiro gagged. He couldn't breathe. The smoke was becoming too much. His grip on Ignis's leg slipped, and she ripped herself out of his grip.

"Raaaaaaaaaagh!"

She raised her hands and blasted at him with an intense blast of pure energy. Poppy shot forward, and the two of them moved in conjunction to stop the blast in mid-air with their own blast.

"Come on!" Poppy insisted, as she grabbed hold of his arm. "Take in several, deep breathes..."

Her powers over wind and air gave her the ability to clean the air around them and make it breathable. Ichiro took in a deep breath as Poppy clutched his arm tightly. She began to drag him away.

"No!" He told her, struggling somewhat. "This isn't--"

"It is!" She cried, losing her patience. Ichiro let out a gasp. She was dragging the air out of his lungs. He slumped forward, unconscious. She tightened her grip around him and dragged him back, away from the flames, and their enemy. She darted through a hallway, into a vacant classroom, and shattered the window by throwing a desk at it with her powers. She narrowly dragged Ichiro out as the flames began to engulf the entire building.

She stopped in mid-air, and allowed Ichiro to breathe. He let out a deep gasp of air.

"What were you thinking?" Poppy reprimanded him, the moment he regained consciousness. "Did you think you were being cool?"

He coughed wildly, and did not properly answer her. Poppy was about to reprimand him further when a streak of light shot out from the building.

Poppy flew backward as Miss Ignis came to a halt right in front of them. They stared at each other, floating in mid-air. Poppy clutched Ichiro around her tightly.

Miss Ignis shrieked. Her form turned that of a great flaming bird, and its wings spread wide as it rocketed towards them. Poppy closed her eyes, bracing herself.

BANG.

The bird screeched. The flames dissipated in mid-air as the woman within tumbled from the sky, a bullet wound in her chest. She snarled, as she whirled around in mid-air, her eyes focused in on the man on the ground below.

"Who dares strike me?" She snarled. "Identify yourself!"

The man lowered the still smoking gun.

"You don't remember me, Miss Ignis?" He asked. "It hasn't been that long."

The woman narrowed her eyes. She clutched at her chest, trying to rip the bullet back out. She was shocked to find that she couldn't do

it.

"Who are you?" She screeched at him, her temper flaring. Poppy had to recoil away several feet, because the sheer amount of heat emanating from her body was becoming unbearable for them.

He shot at her again. Ignis tried to swerve out of the way, but Poppy quickly raised her hand: The bullet was pushed back on target and into her head.

"UGH!"

Her head shot backward, exploding into a fountain of blood and guts. The remains of the woman's once beautiful red hair fell down to the ground below.

"Uugggh..."

The Witch tilted her head downward.

"Whoever you are-" A demonic voice rasped from the remains of her head. "You will not escape this place alive."

Poppy turned around, eyes wide.

"She's showing her True Form!" She shouted down to him. "Be careful!" American narrowed his eyes as he stared up at the bleeding stump that used to be Miss Ignis's head began to contort and twist around itself. Her innards that made up her tongue and throat rose upward, lengthening and convulsing, growing larger and larger as it took on the massive shape of a horned animal.

It resembled a goat, or perhaps a boar or a bull. It snorted its nostrils at him, and intense steam emanated from it.

"You will regret this, mortal!" The thing sneered. It curled into a ball and fell. It landed perhaps twenty feet away from it, but the sheer size and weight of the creature caused an intense shaking of the earth. The burning school behind them crumbled, as the beast stood up, staring down at him. Its black horns flashed bright red as it bent over on all fours and advanced.

American stood his ground and fired. The rounds from his father's gun blasted apart her almost impenetrable skin, and she snarled at

him.

"What is that weapon?"

"You still don't remember?" American asked. "My father sacrificed himself to give this to me... so I could protect myself from you. It is now fulfilling its purpose! His sacrifice will not be in vain!"

"Your father?" She repeated, as he blasted her again. "No... Freeman?"

He shot her again, blasting apart more of her head. She grimaced, bracing her hooves against the ground as she stared at him.

"So the prodigal son returns." She said quietly. "We wondered when you might."

"You and Sinistra, you mean?"

"Sinistra...?" She looked confused for a moment, and then laughed.

"Ah yes. The girl. Yes... I suppose she too speaks of you fondly..."

"Where is Sinistra now?" American asked, as he took a step forward.

"She has long ago surpassed me." Miss Ignis answered. "She is, by far, the greatest witch I have ever helped train. She is the one who will usher in a new age of prosperity for the Ignis."

She smiled at him wryly. "I hope you are prepared to die, American Freeman." She said.

He shot her, one last time, and she fell back. Her True Form, the one that she only showed to her greatest enemies, was no match for him.

He looked up as Poppy descended on them, carrying Ichiro in her grasp. The moment they hit the ground she fell to her knees, gasping for breath. Ichiro staggered slightly, and stood, slumped over. He looked upward at American.

"You made it look easy." He rasped.

"You two look the worst for wear." American said quietly. "Get in the car."

Ichiro bent over and picked up Poppy. She let out a surprised squeak as he lifted her off the ground.

"H-hey..." She said, blushing somewhat. "I can walk you know."

"Yeah, but you don't want to."

Poppy threw her head back and groaned. "You can see right through me."

American said nothing as Ichiro carried the witch to the car. He set her down in the backseat and sat down beside her. She sighed, adjusting her head to lay in his lap.

"Everything worked out." She murmured quietly, as American made his way to the driver's seat. "We both almost died, but..."

"It was fun."

She tilted her head upward to look up at him, blinking owlishly.

"I'm glad we're fighting back." Ichiro said. "Even if we die... what we're doing is right."

She smiled at him.

"That's right." She said softly. "But we're not going to enjoy our victory if we throw our lives away for no reason. Next time... let's be a little more considerate, okay?"

...

Celia Rosenbaum was kneeling in the garden, spade in hand, carefully planting some fresh seeds as Soleil came up from behind her.

"May I join you?"

"Oh... of course." Celia said, as Soleil kneeled beside her. "I didn't know you liked gardening."

"I don't." Soleil said, so bluntly that it made Celia laugh.. "But I want to talk to you."

"Well it'll be good for you to try new things." Celia said warmly. She took a look around the garden. "This place was a real church once."

She said, a bit solemn. "You can tell this garden used to be well cared for... but under the Ignis they simply let it grow wild. It's sad."

"Yes." Soleil said, her voice heavy.

"I've been frozen for twenty years..." Celia murmured. "I suppose in some ways I'm no different than this land." She tapped the soil with her spade. "I've been through a lot, but I'll recover. And hopefully, do some good in the world."

"That's a good way of thinking." Soleil told her. "I'm not sure I would do the same, if I had been through what you had."

Celia gave her a look.

"Considering you killed all of our abusers in single combat... all by yourself... I don't think you could have been taken captive. You're too strong to play the damsel in distress."

"Perhaps." Soleil said quietly.

"Who are you, anyway?" Celia asked, as she moved onto the next patch of soil. "I've trained with some of the best... and fought against them too. But by my estimation no one comes close to your power."

"I am a vampire hunter." Soleil said. "My Mother is Ilia Blade."

Celia gave her a surprised look. "What?" She asked. "She only had one son-" She shook her head wildly. "Forgive me." She said. "I keep forgetting... I've been in stasis so long that I- don't understand the current state of the world."

"When were you born?"

"1980." She said promptly. "My sister and I were captured in battle in 2000... and kept on ice since then."

"You don't look a day over twenty."

"Thank you." Celia said. "But that is the purpose of Cryogenics.... To preserve youth."

They sat together in silence.

"I'm sorry if I'm bringing up poor memories." Soleil said.

"No." Celia said immediately. "It's because of you that I'm a free woman now. I'm grateful for that. We all are. Even the vampire."

Goneril had been locked in the church basement. Over the past few days as the rest of the girls living in the shelter worked tirelessly to make the old church into a proper home, the vampire had been rampaging around her prison, demanding blood and wanting to know why they had bothered to free her if they were simply going to keep her under lock and key. Soleil had been able to procure a number of blood packs for her to consume, but she didn't consider up them up to her standards.

"Perhaps she is, in her own way." Soleil said. "But she's upset that I won't allow her to feed on any of us. I don't work well with vampires. Truth be told... I don't know how I'm going to deal with her."

"Hm." Celia said. "Is that why you came to me? To ask me for advice?"

"Well, yes." Soleil said. "You have the most combat experience, and you've been handling all of this better than most. I was thinking you would make a better leader for the shelter than I would."

"I think you're not giving yourself enough credit." Celia said gently. "You're doing a fantastic job. The girls here wouldn't accept anyone else as their leader. You husband knew that... and I know that too."

Soleil fell silent, staring at Celia's moving hands.

"If we liberate this city..." Celia said quietly. "I'd like for us to be friends."

"When we liberate it." Soleil said. Celia smiled at her. They stood up, Celia holding the spade in her hand, as they made their way back into the shelter.

They found the witch Elsin Jillian standing in the entrance hall, looking agitated. She had pressed an ice pack against her head and was pacing back and forth.

"Are you feeling any better?" Soleil asked, as they came to a stop. Jillian shook her head.

"Not at all." She said. "The climate here... is not to my preference." She scowled. "This is the work of that accursed Ignis Arrakeen! It is she who is responsible for this!"

"We should just throw you back in the Cryogenic chamber." Celia noted. "It would be more comfortable for you."

Jillian shook her head.

"The vampire is down there." She said. "I do not wish to antagonize her more than necessary."

"Your concern is greatly appreciated." Soleil said, privately thinking how odd it was for a Hellraiser witch to be so considerate. "But please don't feel the need to push yourself so hard. If you're feeling overwhelmed please... use the cryo chamber to your hearts content. I will deal with Goneril, if necessary."

"You are very kind." Jillian said. "Perhaps too kind, considering the circumstances."

"You have a vested interest in stopping the Ignis." Soleil said. "Our interests overlap at this stage. That is all."

"Indeed." Jillian said. "I will aid you to the best of my ability."

They walked away, leaving her alone with her ice pack.

"We can't trust her." Celia said quietly.

"I know." Soleil said heavily. "But we need every ally we can get. And it is true that her coven is directly at risk of extinction if Ignis Arrakeen has her way."

"That isn't going to happen." Celia said shortly. "The Elsin are based in Canada."

"Arrakeen desires to turn the entire world into a desert wasteland." Soleil answered. "Witches that don't favor such conditions have good reason to oppose it."

Celia pursed her lips.

"I don't like it." She said. "Trusting a witch goes against my faith."

"Mine as well." Soleil said heavily. "But we mustn't forget the bigger picture."

They entered the hall, where a number of the young girls were gathered. They greeted them cordially, and continued their work. Soleil felt a strange sense of isolation: Most of these girls had no background in combat at all. There would be very little they could do to defend themselves if fighting broke out here. It would be necessary for her and Celia to stay put and protect them from potential threats. Soleil was beginning to feel more and more as if she were trapped. She found herself wishing, more and more that she was at home, with her husband.

The door to the side banged open. Soleil whirled, placing a hand on the weapon satchel on her leg as a Windsor Witch bustled forward. She was barefoot, and her cut off jeans ran up all the way up her thighs. Her sleeveless tank top showed off her well defined arms and shoulders, and she was smiling more widely than any Witch she had ever seen.

"I've got guns!" Windsor Annie said cheerfully. Behind her floating lockers filled with weapons floated behind her. They set themselves down on either side of her and popped open, revealing rows and rows of rifles, shotguns, rocket launchers, and handguns. Behind her a golden retriever stepped forward, its tail wagging.

"Oh, cute!" One of the girls gushed, as she stepped forward. "Can I pet him?"

"Certainly, Madame... if you pick up a gun first." The dog said. The girl recoiled, open mouthed, as Annie grinned.

"He's my familiar." She said, as she bent over and scratched the dog behind the ears. "His name is Oakley."

"A pleasure." Oakley said politely, as he held out his paw. The girl, rather reluctantly, took it.

"Wh-what is a familiar... exactly?" She asked, a little bit apprehensively.

"They're animals who form close ties to witches." Soleil explained. "Sometimes they're used for ritualistic sacrifices, or..."

"In my case, I am simply a dear friend." Oakley said. "Please treat me as you would any other dog."

The girl shot a look at Annie. "Uh... so CAN I pet him..."

"If you agree to go through a crash course in fire arm training, sure." Annie said cheerfully.

"Why?" Celia asked, frowning. "We're not going to send them into combat."

"No, but they may need to defend themselves." Annie said. "And guns are the best way for the cattle to do that."

"I didn't give permission for this." Soleil said, her voice cold. "My intention was to secure this location and-"

"Call it a charitable gift from the Boss." Anne interrupted. She had already bent down and pulled out a small automatic pistol.

A lot of the girls had never held a weapon in their lives before. They gave each other reluctant looks.

"A weapon is always better than no weapon." Oakley said. "There is no shame in acquiring power to defend yourself."

Soleil was at a loss. On one hand, they were absolutely right. She had been so focused on making the Church habitable that she hadn't even really considered the needs of the girls under her supervision. On the other hand... allowing the Windsor to involve themselves in her affairs was never part of her plan. Allowing witches near young girls in vulnerable situations was never a good idea. She was certain that Eilonwy already had her eye set on converting one or more of them to her coven.

It was a delicate situation. She struggled to find some sort of objection.

"I think it's a good idea." She said stiffly. "Provided that they know their weapons are only to be used during emergencies."

"Excellent." Annie said, beaming. "I'll set up a range for them to use, and schedule a drill plan for them... leave all of that to me."

The Golden Retriever turned and walked off, his tail wagging.

"I'll see you all soon then." Annie said, waving, as she lay a hand down on the dog's head. "I'll leave the weapons here for you... Good-bye!"

And she was gone as quickly as she came.

"She's quite the handful." Celia said quietly to her. "If there is anyone we should be wary of, it is the Windsor."

Soleil nodded her agreement.

They parted ways soon after that... Celia was on cooking duty, and Soleil thought it best to meet with Isobel to discuss important matters.

. "I spoke with Celia earlier about how few fighters we have among the girls here." Soleil said. Isobel looked up at her.

"Oh?"

"I was wondering if you would be able to take to the front lines, if necessary."

Isobel looked down at the table. She looked suddenly very uncomfortable.

"O-oh..." She said slowly. "Well... it's true that I was an acolyte at one point in my life... but I never ascended so..."

"But you still have powers."

"Ones that I can't properly control." Isobel said quietly. "I think because I was in captivity here so long my powers stagnated..."

"I believe that is a good thing."

"I don't." Isobel said bluntly. She recoiled a bit at Soleil's intense stare. "I-I mean... what I mean to say is-"

"Your humanity is worth more than anything a demon could grant you." Soleil said, her voice ice cold. "Never forget that."

Isobel stared down at the table.

"I hate being human." Isobel murmured, her eyes downcast.

"Everything is so hard... I've always wanted to live... to live like an animal..."

"If you were born an animal you would envy mankind, for all that we have accomplished." Soleil said coldly. "You must accept your place in life, and be thankful for all that you have."

Isobel began to shake her head, and then stopped. Her breath hitching in her throat.

"I don't have anything." She repeated. "I'm... a terrible person, Soleil. Every since I was little I was different than other people-"

"Everyone feels that way." Soleil said coldly. She had no patience for this kind of thinking.

Isobel kept speaking, barely registering her blatant dismissal. "I was different." She repeated. "I've always known I was different... I hated everyone around me... I... used people, Soleil."

"Everyone sins." Soleil said, trying to keep her voice calm. "Without sin, there cannot be virtue."

Isobel looked up at her. She was crying. Soleil stood up, and walked around the table towards her. She held out her arms and wrapped them around her neck.

"You will be a good person." Soleil whispered. "No one here blames you for what has happened. At your lowest moment, you chose to think of others. You are better than you know, Isobel... and I hope someday you come to realize that."

She pulled away and Isobel sniffed, rubbing her eyes.

"If you want my advice." Soleil said. "You must start thinking about using what power you do have for good. You are not a witch, but you have power beyond that of most of the girls here... you could protect them, when I cannot."

"I don't... I don't think I can." Isobel said, her voice uncertain.

"You will." Soleil said reassuringly. Isobel shook her head, and then made her way for the door. She stopped, and then looked back.

"I wish... I had a friend like you." She said. She flushed, as if embarrassed, and then quickly turned back around to the door.

Soleil looked at the door, feeling oddly crestfallen.

"I thought.... We were already friends." She said aloud, once she was sure that Isobel could not hear her.

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....

The nine members of the fourth circle sat in a circle surrounded by flame. A number of select apprentices, those who were being considered to lead the charge against Americana, sat at their feet and waited.

"Where is Sinistra?" A pleasant voice rang out. "Your apprentice is late."

"She is near." A voice rang out. "I can sense her."

A rumbling could be heard beneath their feet. The floor beneath them began to crack and splinter. And suddenly Sinistra was blasted through the floor and into the air. She spun around, fire spurting from her body, as she stared down the hole in which she came.

"I told you I was sorry, come on!" She shouted, at the top of her lungs.

A bright green stalk began to crawl out of the hole after her. It grew and grew, into a large bud, and then sprouted into a full flower. As the petals opened, a witch with bright red hair lay there almost lazily.

"My apologies." Thorn said quietly. "This one needed a little bit of discipline."

Ignis Thorn was one of the Nine, and in charge of agriculture. She was responsible for keeping plants growing, no matter how many times they were eaten or destroyed.

"Well met, Thorn." A quiet voice rang out. "You too, are late."

"You have learned to accept that... have you not?" Thorn asked, as the stem of her flower carried her seat to her place. Her apprentice, a girl named Dahlia, quickly stood up and greeted her with a bow. Thorn settled in her spot and surveyed the circle. "It has been a long time since I've seen many of you... Ninian, particularly."

Ninian, a woman with a round face, leaned forward .

"We were fighting the good fight in Germany." She rasped. "Against the Cattle, against the Order of the Dragon, against the Noctis... We were beset on all sides, and what happens?"

Smoke poured out of her ears.

"You abandon us." She said. "You told us that if we wanted your assistance that you would have to help you take America first. In the end we had no choice but to comply."

Ninian bent her head.

"We have lost Europe because of your actions." She said. "The Hellraisers are a dying culture, and yet you sit here in your little countryside villa and lord over your lowest servants as kings." She spoke with contempt. "I assure you.... This land will mark our very extinction."

"Better to burn out than to fade away!" Kiara shouted. There was a murmur of agreement from the rest of the circle. Ninian's objections had been falling on deaf ears for a long time.

"There is some wisdom to that." Francesca said sagely, bending her head. "If we are truly free to do as we will, than we have no obligation to care for future generations."

Ninian grimaced. "You-"

"Do you not want to be free... Ninian?"

The women were arranged in a circle. But yet there was one with at the table who commanded more authority than any of them. This was the witch who most regularly communed with the Master and commanded all of the others. She was the Voice.

"No." Ninian said immediately, as she turned to the Voice of Ignis. "I serve the Master . Allowing our people to whatever they want has bred a culture that doesn't represent our true values. Our priority should be cultivating a new generation of witches... ones who can wage war on the Noctis and the Cattle to better protect the interests of our Master." She spoke with an almost religious reverence. Being a Witch that had grown up in a deeply Christian community, she had transplanted that love and adoration for God onto the master.

Sinistra realized that she still had not taken her position. She quickly regained her composure and soared down, and settled at the Voice's feet. The witch began to stroke her head as she leaned back, enjoying the sensation on her scalp.

"I have found a greater talent than all of you." The Voice said. "I was selected by the Master because I best represent his values... the values you claim to uphold."

"The Master doesn't understand that we are on the verge of extinction." Ninian said coldly. "Concepts such as that elude immortal beings."

"If we live, we are strong... if we die, we are weak." The Voice said, as she continued stroking Sinistra's head. She arched her back and let out a comfortable purr. "The Master will live on... regardless of what happens to us. If we were to go extinct, I have no doubts that someday he will commune with a new woman to serve him. And the cycle will begin anew."

Ninian glowered.

"This is my desire." The Voice said. "To live as freely as possible. And if that means that I must allow our people to die... so be it."

Ninian glowered at her. Under the law of the Ignis, as commanded by the Master himself, the only way to remove a Voice from her position was to kill her. Ninian could not hope to do that without the support of the majority of the Nine.

"Now." The Voice said. "Enough of the past. Let us speak of the future."

"Hell yeah." Kiara said enthusiastically, as the lines on the floor began to light up. Fire began to spring up, and take on elaborate shapes and symbols.

"The concern that we are beset on all side by enemies is incorrect." The Voice said. "No Witch holds as much control over any one piece of this state than we do. It is not impossible that we can wrest control of this region from Americana himself.."

A shape that resembled the state of Indiana appeared among the flames.

"Our objective." The Voice said quietly. "Is to destroy all of our opposition... completely and totally."

The flames making up the State exploded into sparks.

"To do this." The Voice continued. "We require the aid of the Master... the Immortal Ignis. He will do battle with Americana, and as they fight we will spread our culture far as we are able."

There was a deafening silence. Although Ignis was not the most powerful demon known to man... far from it, in fact... his power was so overwhelmingly great it was easy to imagine that he could consume the entire planet in flames, ending the Golden Age of Man and bringing about a new era of demonic control over the Earth. A true second age of Chaos. The World sought by the Grand High Witch herself.

"Awesome." Kiara said mildly, as she bobbed her head up and down. She had an earpiece in one ear, Ninian realized in disgust. She glanced to the side, where Ignis Kamura sat impassively. She did not look at her.

"We have enough resources now to summon Ignis." The Voice continued. "Our main concern now... is making the most of His Power." She held out a hand and beckoned a finger.

"Bring forth the girl." The Voice ordered. Sinistra flinched for a moment... for a moment she thought she was about to get dragged out into the circle. But instead another girl was thrust forward, into the middle of their circle.

She was not a Witch. She stood there in rags, barefoot and shivering, her bright orange hair unkempt as she stared up at the circle in horror.

"Kneel." The Voice commanded. The girl did so, her entire body shaking.

"Call the Master." The Voice commanded.

The girl bent her head and pressed it to the ground.

"I-I can't!"

"Liar."

Sinistra sat up. She instinctively felt her entire body tense. All of the women in the circle seemed to not breathe as the girl sat back up. She smiled sickly, and placed her arm on her knee.

"Pleasant." The girl rasped. Her voice had become deep and demonic. **"I feel... happy."**

"Master." The Voice said formally, as she bowed her head. The other members of their fourth circle, and their apprentices, quickly followed suit. The girl's eyes, which had gone from a relatively normal shape and color had become bright vibrant orange and slitted.

"This body does not suit me." It rasped. **"I lack the means to make love to you all."**

It looked straight at Sinistra as he said this, licking its lips. Sinistra felt a strong surge of disgust. She also knew that when the time came she would not be allowed to refuse.

"Soon, Master." The Voice said quietly. "You know better than we that you will not satisfied simply having this entire city."

The creature laughed.

"You know me very well, English." He rasped. **"You are the ideal voice. You put my needs and desires before your own."**

"I live to serve." The Voice, English, said demurely. "And I have prepared for you the ideal wife."

She placed her hand on Sinistra's back, and Sinistra was forced into a kneeling position. She kneeled, staring at the demon. She felt a strange mix of emotions: Revulsion, longing, appreciation, love, disgust, and confusion.

"Look, I like someone else." She told him bluntly. "You better have a big enough cock to make it up to me."

There was dead silence in the room. And then the creature began to laugh.

"I like this one, English!" It crowed. **"You were right! She is unlike any other I have ever seen!"**

Sinistra smiled grimly.

"Look." She said. "You know what, I don't care how big your cock is. I'm not interested."

The demon laughed again.

"There is a certain joy in taking a woman who doesn't want to be taken." He sneered. **"I'll have you... and your sisters... whether you want me or not. And never again will desire for another man cross your mind."**

Sinistra turned around and glanced at The Voice.

"Can I go now?" She complained. English placed a hand on her head.

"Sinistra." She said quietly, as she turned her head back around. "Be polite."

Sinistra sighed, as she blinked wildly at the possessed girl in front of her. "It's going to be pretty hard for you to fuck my brains out when you're in the body of a twenty year old girl."

Ignis looked shocked. And then he thrust his head back and roared with laughter.

"A wild one!" He roared. **"Yes, yes, I will enjoy this one very much! She-"**

It bent its head over and gagged. The apprentices in the circle flinched, expecting some kind of wild transformation. But when the girl raised her head again, she was again just a girl.

"P-please..." The girl begged. "Let me stop..."

She clutched her head and keeled over, her eyes shut tight. She was desperately trying to fight off the possession of the beast.

"Take her away." English commanded, with a wave of her hand. "She gets no meals unless she allows the Master full control. Starve her until she is nothing but bones, if you must."

The apprentices hurried to obey. The girl was dragged off of the center of the floor, and there was silence.

"As you can see." The Voice continued; her tone neutral. "The Host has an extraordinary force of will. Until she breaks completely, the Master cannot fight in battle alongside us. When she is killed in battle- fighting against Americana... we will sacrifice her soul to bring Ignis himself here, immediately, to deal as much damage to this country as we can."

An intense explosion of flame sprouted out from the center of the dais.

"America will be enveloped in flames." She whispered. "If we win we will become one of the Seven Dark Powers. If we lose-"

She smiled.

"So much of this fertile land will be inhabitable to those that do not bow to our god." She whispered. "And we will become ever stronger."

...

"Raise your hands high... that's it."

Windsor Poppy struggled a little bit. She teetered on her toes, let out a bit of a squeak, and then collapsed.

"I think it's a little bit too soon for you to doing ballet." Eilonwy said, amused, from the corner of the room. Poppy sighed.

"I hate not doing my best when everyone else is risking their lives." She complained. "It makes me feel useless." She tried to rise herself from the ground using magic, but a strong weight was suddenly pressed against her.

"No magic!" Windsor Madelyn snapped at her. A tall, intimidating woman with green hair that she kept tied in a ponytail, Madelyn had a reputation for being rather scary. Madelyn was a ballet great instructor, but she was known to be a rather aggressive teacher.

"I-I know." I forgot." Poppy murmured, ashamed, as she stood up and brushed out her skirts. "Um- is it okay- am I excused from class today?"

Madelyn glanced at Eilonwy, who gave a firm nod. Madelyn sighed.

"I wouldn't normally allow it, but considering we are at war-"

"I would never skip class, normally." Poppy said, in a rush. "But-"

"There is no need to apologize, child." Eilonwy said, smiling. "But I'm afraid I'm going to ask you to confine yourself to your room until you are fully recovered. No boys."

Poppy's voice fell. "N-not even a phone call?"

"A phone call is acceptable. But nothing more, you understand?"

Poppy nodded, looking somewhat pleased, as she trooped up back to her room. Madelyn watched her go, a water bottle hovering in mid-air by her head.

"I asked her if she was feeling up to it before we started." She told Eilonwy. "She told me she could handle it."

"You know how children are." Eilonwy said. "Always wanting to prove themselves. She didn't want you to think she was avoiding her lessons."

Madelyn shook her head. Her long green hair swished back and forth. "After what happened at the school I would have forgiven her. She should have been honest with me about her condition."

"I'll talk to her." Eilonwy promised. "Do you have any more classes scheduled today?"

"No... why?"

"I was wondering if you would instruct the girls at the women's shelter..."

"Alongside Annie?" Madelyn frowned. "Why?"

"It will prove beneficial for us to leave a lasting positive impression on these people." Eilonwy said. "If we are to win their trust."

"I see..." Madelyn murmured. "But that may prove difficult. "The Freeman Woman-"

"Is only one girl." Eilonwy interjected. "We must establish that we have everything under control. To put their minds at ease."

Madelyn's eyes flickered.

"Of course." She replied evenly. "I will do what I can."

"Excellent." Eilonwy said. "Now if you'll excuse me... I think I'll go have a word with Poppy. To make sure that she isn't sneaking off with her new boyfriend."

Eilonwy took a step forward.

Eilonwy trotted up the stairs to the room. She knocked, and opened the door. Poppy lay sprawled among her plushies of merchandise, staring upwards at her shoujo anime poster. Eilonwy approached her.

"I thought being a witch would make life easier... you know?" Poppy said, as Eilonwy kneeled down on top of the plush chair.

"We all did." Eilonwy said gently. "You've had a rough fight. It's going to take some time to recover."

Poppy groaned.

"I bet Ichiro is out having fun." She glowered.

"You haven't called him yet?"

"No, I wanted to collect my thoughts." She said. She paused a little. "He's a different person when he fights."

"Everyone is." Eilonwy said gently.

"You think?"

Poppy closed her eyes. "He was kind of mean to me." She said.

"When I said we should run away... he didn't like it."

"Hm." Eilonwy said. "Sometimes people say things they don't mean. Other times... they're showing you who they really are."

Poppy was completely silent.

"I want to have one romance that I can look back on fondly for the rest of my life." Poppy said. "I don't want to be alone... lusting after men born a hundred years after I..."

Eilonwy's expression became somewhat fixed.

"You're young: you don't know what's best for you yet." Eilonwy said.

"Those same qualities that attracted you to him may someday be something you learn to resent. And maybe you'll part ways because of it."

"Has that ever happened to you?"

"Hm."

Eilonwy leaned back into the chair and stared up at the ceiling. "I am over two hundred and fifty years old." She began. "I've been in love many times... but my feelings have never been returned."

Poppy stared at her rather intently.

Eilonwy closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"It takes an extraordinary man to love a witch." She said. "And men like that often love others."

She fell silent. She braced herself, and continued:

"Even if it does work." She said. "Even if he does love you... you will outlive him. You must learn to accept that. It hurts, but you must understand that for us, love is fleeting. The Master must come first."

"I understand." Poppy said slowly. "But why does the Master allow us to feel these things?"

Eilonwy smiled. She leaned over and kissed her forehead.

"Because he wants us to find happiness, if it finds us." She said.
"Enjoy your time with Ichiro. For better or for worse, you'll make lifelong memories."

She stood up and made her way to the door.

"Rest." She said. "I daresay very soon we will need all hands on deck."

...

Marlene spread out under her favorite bush and yawned. It was safer to sleep out in the open than in the house because no one really assumed that anything valuable was out in the yard. There had been times when she had been sleeping out here when the house had been broken into by the local gangs. If she had been inside, she might have gotten hurt. So she felt more comfortable out here, hidden in plain sight.

Plus it helped her get a sense of what was going on with the people around her. Too many weirdos had been coming and going lately... it wouldn't be long until someone came and decided to take advantage of her. No, she would come out only to eat, and then come back to sleep.

"Oh Marlene..."

Her eyes fluttered open. The old woman from down the street was calling her name. The food for the day must be ready.

She sat up, and did not brush off all of the twigs and dirt as she crawled out from under the bush. She looked both ways down the street before getting to her feet and waddling down the sidewalk.

She was thankful that she didn't have to walk far: She was hungry, and the longer she had to walk for food the more risk she took being singled out by someone dangerous. No, she would eat and then return to her little hole, where she would stay until she could eat again.

Miss Finch was standing up on the front porch, smiling down at her widely.

"I made your favorite." She said warmly.

Her new favorite was American Freeman's cooking, so she found herself feeling a little bit disappointed when she gestured to the giant apple pie in front of the windowsill. She bit down the feeling, though... food was food, after all.

"Thank you." Marlene said. The woman gave a small start.

"Uh- y-you're welcome." She said, startled. Marlene felt a little confused: American Freeman had told her to always thank people when given things. It was supposed to make them happy, not make them confused and uncomfortable. She wondered if she should even bother, next time she was given food.

The pie was sitting on the windowsill, so it was too high for her to reach. She waved her hand upward, trying to pry it off. Miss Finch stood, smiling at her in silence as she slowly worked to get the pie off of the windowsill.

She finally got it, and she precariously teetered over to her little table as she set it down. The old woman was smiling widely at her.

"Eat up!" She giggled.

Marlene looked up at her.

"You haven't given me any utensils." She said. The smile on the old woman's face began to fade.

"Just eat with your hands, like you always do."

Marlene was confused: American had been very clear when he had told her how he wanted her to behave. Why was Miss Finch so different?

She discarded her thinking immediately. She was being silly. Food was food, after all. She supposed that some people were just being weird.

But who was being weird and who was normal?

She took her hand and jammed it into the pie. She pulled out a thick, creamy substance and raised it to her mouth. She placed the food in her mouth and began to eat. She had to stop herself from gagging:

"Eat up, eat up!" Miss Finch encouraged, as Marlene continued to eat. As always she had to force more food into her mouth before she was done swallowing the last bite. That was another thing that was different about American Freeman... he wanted her to chew.

As the thought crossed her mind, she gagged. She raised her hand to her mouth and tried to spit out the thing in her mouth. Miss Finch leaned forward and firmly pressed her mouth shut with her hand.

"You mustn't waste food." She told her. Marlene barely heard her. Although she had nothing more in her mouth, she still felt as if something was in her throat.

"A-agh!"

She spluttered, and some blood shot of her mouth and onto the grass. Miss Finch pulled away.

"Dear me." She said. "You're not feeling well, are you? Come on inside and I'll give you some water."

A flash of fear went through her.

"N-no I don't-"

Miss Finch grabbed her by the arm and dragged her inside. Marley was too weak to protest or to defend herself with her limited magic. Perched on a tree some distance away, an Owl narrowed her eyes and took off.

Miss Finch shut the door behind them and the bolts and locks latched themselves shut. She led Marley through the dark house, not to the kitchen like she had implied, but to the bathroom.

A number of dried out husks of little girls just like her were hanging from the walls, at every angle staring down at them with blank eyes. Marley didn't move as Miss Finch restrained her, and then lifted her

up. Marlene found herself hanging over the bathtub, no different than the other husks in the room.

She coughed again, and the blood formed a small pool of blood at the bottom of the tub.

"Now that just won't do." Miss Finch said quietly

Marlene whimpered pitifully. Little red spikes began to poke out of her arms, and blood began to flow out of them. It came out like a trickle.

"You WILL spout more blood." Miss Finch told her. "And die, to give me life..."

Marlene coughed. "G-god..." Finch grinned wickedly at her.

"Well, I suppose if there is a God you'll get to live in the afterlife. If not... you're shit out of luck."

She cackled wildly, so wildly in fact she did not even turn around as the door burst open and American Freeman shot her.

The woman crumpled at his feet as American gingerly stepped forward, raising his hands and gently undoing Marlene's bindings. She moaned pitifully at him.

"No... I don't want..."

"I'm not going to hurt you." American said, his voice firm, as he lowered Marlene from her restraints. He held her to his chest as she let out another excrement of blood onto his shirt. "I'm here to help you."

He turned and carried her out of the house.

...

"It is not a possession." Eilonwy clarified, before they had even set the girl down in front of her. She stepped forward lightly and examined the girl's body with a scientific interest. "It is a parasite."

"How is that possible?" American asked quietly. He had brought Marlene to the Windsor's Shrine immediately, hoping to get some

insight from the Witches there.

"Well some demons can replicate after being severed in pieces." Eilonwy explained. "But to regenerate they need to feed off of stronger forces. There are demons that are known to be eaten alive and to slowly infest the body of the predator from inside..."

She tapped the girl idly ,and she grimaced in pain.

"My best guess is that it is one of those types." She said. "It seems to be trying to bleed her out from the inside. By the sound of it that old bat was using the blood for a ritual..."

Marlene let out an anguished sob.

"What must we do?" Soleil asked grimly.

"A doctor." Eilonwy said quietly. "Who can remove it."

There was a very heavy silence.

"There aren't a lot of people who can perform an operation like that." American said. "This isn't an ordinary parasite. It will fight back."

"There must be someone who can do it in Indianapolis." Soleil said. Her eyes narrowed. "You have no one, Eilonwy?"

"I do not." Eilonwy said heavily. "The Windsor pretty strongly lean towards the arts and history. We're not particularly advanced healers... we can heal simple things like broken bones and the like, but this-"

She closed her eyes and sighed.

"Indiana is not a region that attracts the sort of person who would be able to deal with this kind of thing." She soft softly. "It is so peaceful here that there isn't a need for this kind of treatment."

"Then we'll travel." American said finally.

"And leave the community vulnerable?" Soleil reprimanded him. "No, we cannot leave now. We've only just begun striking back at the Ignis. If we allow them half an opportunity to regroup they will."

Eilonwy frowned. "We have things perfectly under control. You can afford to take the girl to get treated."

Soleil shook her head. "The shelter needs us." She insisted.

American gave her a look.

"Soleil." He said. "Marlene needs us now."

Soleil gave him a shocked look.

"I know you're worried about the others, but we can't let her suffer."

American said. "Her parents left her alone in that house alone, and she's been fending for herself ever since. We're the only people in the world who care about her." He paused. "We're like... her parents."

Soleil stared at him, her eyes narrowed. "I do not see her parents here." She said finally. "From this moment on we *are* her parents."

American felt a great surge of affection for Soleil. She turned back around to Eilonwy.

"I have selected a second in command for the shelter in case of emergencies like this." She said. "Her name is Celia Rosenbaum... she will be in charge of the shelter until we return."

"Ah, the Dragon Knight." Eilonwy said amicably. "Yes... She is certainly a fine choice. You have nothing to worry about." She gestured to the child in front of her. "Other than your child, of course."

American grimaced, his gaze set, as he grabbed hold of her.

"Now, I've done everything I can for her." Eilonwy said, as she led them to the front of the church. "Although the demon needs to be surgically removed, it has gone into remission. But it won't stay that way for long. If you take too long it will awaken, and unless you find someone else who can remove it before that happens..."

"How long do we have?"

"There is no way to tell." Eilonwy answered. "It isn't a powerful demon, so I would say quite a long time... longer than a week. But

the girl is so young, and a witch at that. It potentially could be significantly faster.”

Eilonwy bid them goodbye at the door and American and Soleil made their way to the car. American handed the child off to Soleil and they settled in the backseat. Soleil gave him a look.

“I’m not an exorcist.” She told him. “So if anything happens to her I don’t think there’s anything I can do.”

“You can keep her calm when she wakes up.” American said.

“Sometimes all you can do is be there for other people.”

Soleil nodded, her expression grim, as American started the car and took off.

...

“Soleil left?”

“There was an emergency.” Minerva explained slowly, as if she were speaking to a small child. She scratched her head with her claw and took in the girl in front of her with an unimpressed gaze. “She left you in charge, huh? Well Soleil’s never been one to make particularly good decisions... just look at who she married...”

Celia said nothing. She cast a dark look at the shelter behind them. When she had agreed to become Soleil’s second in command she had not thought she would be put in charge of the shelter under such circumstances. The issues between the girls and the Windsor was mounting. They had all known that Soleil would not be able to supervise the Shelter forever, but the way things were now the Windsor that had been living here with them would be their primary resource for food and protection against the Ignis.

She doubted very much that she would be able to maintain control over the community with so many witches allowed to go freely about. By the time Soleil returned, the women here would likely be more comfortable with the idea of allowing the Windsor absolute control over their lives entirely.

“Are you listening?” Minerva demanded.

"I am." Celia assured you. "You're very wise."

The owl puffed herself up proudly. "All owls are." She said pompously. "And those who listen gain a sliver of our insight."

"Really." Celia said, unimpressed. "Well, perhaps some of the girls here could use some of your wisdom. Why don't you come by tonight and talk to them about what's going on in the city? I'm sure they would really enjoy that-"

Minerva took off into the sky without another word. Celia watched her go, privately noting that Soleil's opinion on the bird had not been in any way exaggerated, and then made her way back into the church.

She stepped into the entrance hall, and found a number of tables and chairs lining the wall. Windsor Madelyn was standing there, in a bright green leotard, instructing a handful of students in ballet. There were a mix of Windsor acolytes and shelter girls, Celia noted immediately. This was an attempt at mixing them.

"Oh, Dame Rosenbaum." Madelyn said pleasantly, as she turned to face her. "Would you like to join us?"

"No thank you." Celia answered politely. "I haven't danced since I was very young." Madelyn clicked her tongue.

"A pity." Madelyn said. "Did you not enjoy it?"

"I believe dancing is sinful."

"Hm." Madelyn wasn't impressed with her tone, and neither were a number of the students. Including, Celia was put off to see, a number of the shelter girls who had up to that point been enjoying themselves. "Perhaps you never learned to appreciate the art enough."

"Perhaps." Celia said, understanding that she was in a dangerous position. If she expressed her religious views here now it would make herself look like a deranged fanatic. She would have to be careful in expressing her faith.

"I believe that a knight of the Dragon should commit herself to defending the people of God's creation." She said. "Dance, games, film... they distract one from fulfilling her duty."

Madelyn tilted her head.

"That's sad." She said. "One must learn to enjoy herself. Perhaps if you joined us today you would see its value."

"Thank you, but no." Celia said, her voice heavy. "Mrs. Freeman has left me in charge, and I must attend to my duties. If you will excuse me."

She could sense that she had made herself look like a fool. She tried to make herself look dignified as she walked from the room: She could hear a little bit of pleasant chatting behind her, and laughter. She steeled herself and kept walking.

I wasn't ready for this. Celia thought to herself grimly as she left the room. The delicate balance of life they had built here for themselves had been broken. It would not be long now until the girls under her protection began asking why they couldn't live in the Windsor Shrine, where it was doubtless much safer...

She needed help. She needed someone to rely on. Someone from her own faith. Someone like...

Him...

...

The letter Celia Rosenbaum had written some time before was a short, brief report to the Order of the Dragon. It took quite some time for it to reach its destination, and even longer for it to be authenticated.

"She's been MIA for twenty years." Zachariah Smith said quietly, as he looked over the letter for the tenth time. "But there is no doubt... this is her handwriting... and it was written recently."

He looked up at his wife, Rebecca, who was busy stirring their stew for the evening. "She still loves you." She said quietly.

Zachariah nodded, his face grim. "She does." He said heavily. "She has no one else to turn to... She is alone, behind enemy lines, trying her best-"

"Or this could be a ruse from one of your enemies." She said quietly.

"Perhaps." He knew better than to challenge his wife on this matter.

"But I must go to America. I must see for myself if she still lives."

Rebecca sighed.

"Perhaps her feelings for you are mutual..." She said quietly.

Zachariah stood up, and wrapped his arm around her.

"She is a fellow knight of the Dragon. I must go to her aid."

Rebecca sighed again and leaned into his chest.

"I don't want you to go..." She said quietly. "Ask the Order to send someone else in your stead."

"It has to be me. Only I could identify whether or not it is truly her."

"When you married me I knew your heart belonged to another. But I did not think she lived still."

"Neither did I." Zachariah said.

"She has no family?"

"She had one sister... her twin sister Celica."

"Yes..." She said slowly. "I remember..."

She looked up at him.

"You would do this for any other Knight?"

"I would."

"Then fly, then. Leave your poor wife and family behind so that you can have an adventure."

She stared at him as he pulled away from her and collected his things.

"Who will be questing with you?" She asked.

"There are a number of knights stationed at the American University Grey Arcadia." He answered. "They're been interested in the Ignis for quite some time... If I could persuade some to come with me, then...Many of them have done more for the world than I ever have."

"Is that so?" She seemed to struggle with her thoughts for a moment. "What... did you do?"

He didn't answer her.

It was long after that that he found himself landing on America's East Coast. He found the car waiting for him at the airport, and he took off to the University.

He found the Cathedral and parked the car. There was a girl waiting for him.

"Hello." She said brightly. "Are you Sir Zachariah?"

"I am. And you must be Dame Alisa Coghlant. I know your grandfather well."

Her glasses glinted in the sunlight. "Everyone does. I hope I can be half the person he is someday." She waved her hand behind her. "Do you want to come inside?"

He followed her up the stone steps. They entered the Church and made their way towards the living quarters. Here Knights of the Order of the Dragon could live in peace from the threats that lurked everywhere in the University.

"I've tried asking around for others to join us." Alisa said quietly. "But everyone else is caught up in their studies... truth be told the only reason I'm going is because it's been a long time since I've seen serious combat. I fear that I'm losing my edge."

"Maybe it's time for you to settle down and start a family."

"Maybe." Alisa said. "The thought has crossed my mind as of late-oh."

A swordsman was sitting in front of them, his leg crossed his knee, watching them carefully.

"When do we leave?" Zane asked.

"As soon as we can." Alisa said. She cast a glance towards Zachariah. "Actually... I think there's someone you should meet before we go.."

"Oh?"

"I was studying the documents that Celia Rosenbaum described.... And I was surprised to learn that one of the girls at her shelter was a student here. The Vampire, Goneril Blackwell, went missing some four years back."

"I knew her." Zane recalled quietly. "She had a fixation on a girl named Lauren Frey..."

"And I knew someone who would know her personally." Alisa Coghlund said. "Charlotte Harker."

"That Charlotte Harker?" At twenty-two Charlotte Harker was already making waves in the world of vampirology. She was already considered at the top of her field.

"Yes. And when I spoke with her about it she was insistent to come along with us."

"She isn't one of us, is she?"

"No, but she's a remarkable woman."

Zachariah nodded. "Is she here now?"

An amused sound came from above him.

He turned to the staircase. Standing five steps up was a blonde young woman. She smiled at him warmly, and descended the stairs.

"I am Charlotte Harker." She said pleasantly, as she held out her hand to him. He took it, and kissed it. "Oh, there's no need for that." She said, laughing a little. "I'm not a Knight of your Order... please think of me as an ordinary civilian."

"You're not one, though...." Alisa said quietly. "Your research has really pushed the world's understanding of vampires. If you marry one of our men you'd be considered one of our top researchers."

"You flatter me." Charlotte said idly, pulling away from Zachariah. She smoothed out the creases on her dress. "But I intend to continue my research no matter who I marry." She was a diligent, intelligent woman. Zachariah could see instantly why she had such a high reputation.

"Regardless, we thank you for your service." Zachariah said. "What do you know of this woman... Goneril Blackwell?"

Charlotte raised her hand to her hair and pushed it back.

"She was a student at this university... and a close confidant and friend." She said. "I daresay a good deal of the advances I have made in my field have been due to her input. She is invaluable to me. It is imperative I get her back, if I am to continue my research."

"What exactly are you working on?"

Charlotte smiled at him idly.

"Well, I could bore you with specifics... but to put it as simply as possible I am attempting to improve on the Helsing solution."

Dr. Van Helsing, the Dutch man of science who had almost singlehandedly stopped Dracula's invasion of England, had developed a cure for vampirism after the Dark Lord had been defeated. This cure, developed during the treatment of Lucy Westernra, had been made too late to save her. But following her death, it had gone on to be used to cure people in the early stages of vampirism all over the world. It was so effective, in fact, that vampirism was considered virtually eradicated in most of the developed world.

"Improve on it?" Zachariah repeated. "Is there something wrong with it?"

"No, of course not." Charlotte said. "Like I said, I won't bore you with the details. But I very much think that your people will be very happy with what I'm going to do." Her eyes seemed to almost sparkle. "But enough talk... we should be off, post haste."

...

Marlene fluttered her eyes open. She moved about in place and shifted about.

"Where... am I...?"

"Shhhh."

Someone shifted right next to her, and she shifted somewhat uncomfortably as American Freeman leaned over her.

"How are you feeling?"

She blinked up at him.

"Like shit."

"Language." He reprimanded her slightly. She gave him a look and was about to speak again when a sharp pain welled up within her. She let out a whimper.

"The doctor says you need to rest." He told her. "Stay still and it'll be better soon."

She tilted her head upward and tried to relax. She winced again and lay completely still.

"What happened to me...?" She wondered aloud.

"You were very sick." American said. "We had to take you in to be treated."

"Why?"

"Why?" American repeated. "Because we wanted you to get better."

Marlene closed her eyes.

"I don't understand."

American smiled at her.

"Doing good things for other people... it's what makes life worth living." He said.

"That doesn't make any sense to me."

"It will." American promised her. "Someday you'll meet someone you care about very much. And you'll understand what it means to be a

good person."

Marlene felt wet around her eyes. Before she could fight through the pain and move her arms to wipe them away, American leaned forward and wiped them away for her.

"For now though we only want you to get better." He said. "Can you do that for me?"

Marlene gritted her teeth and nodded.

"American...?"

"Yes?"

"I want to become a good person."

American smiled warmly down at her.

"You will be." He promised her.

...

American Freeman and his wife came to their home with a child in tow. Soleil spent the entire trip back lecturing Marlene on what was expected of her in the household. More than once Marlene's horrified face caught American's eye in the mirror.

"I'm starting to re-think this whole adoption thing." She said at one point.

"Nonsense." Soleil said briskly. "You will become all the better for it."

"You'll get to eat my cooking every day, Marley." American told her.

"Ugh..." Marlene clutched her head. "Will that be worth it, though?"

They pulled into the driveway and stepped out of the car. American's arms wrapped around Marlene's body. She had fallen asleep... or at least, was pretending to.

"You are being a bit too harsh on her." American told Soleil, as they approached the front door. "She needs a little bit of breathing room while she recovers."

"Yes but she needs to get started on her education now." Soleil said. "She's incredibly unsocialized and malnourished... it's going to take a

lot of work to get her caught up to her peers."

As they were talking, Minerva swooped in from above.

"Woah, Soleil had a baby!"

"No I didn't." Soleil said, exasperated. "She's adopted, I-"

"What news do you have, Minerva?"

"Trouble at the Shelter!" Minerva said. "The Windsor Witches are going to fight the Order of the Dragon!"

"What?"

Soleil gave a startled step forward, and then looked back at American for confirmation.

"I'm going to put Marlene to bed and check our supplies." He said. "Go. Now."

"Thank you." She said softly, and then broke off into a wild sprint.

...

Soleil came to a stop outside of the church. It had been a fairly long distance to sprint: She was breathing a little hard as she came to a stop right outside the barrier.

She was stopped right at the gate by a Windsor Witch.

"State your business!" The girl said, brandishing a gun at her.

Soleil stared at her.

"It was a joke." Annie said, as she lowered the gun. Her familiar, the golden retriever Oakley, trotted out from behind her.

"A joke that could have gotten us killed, milady." Oakley said wryly.

"Ha!" Annie crowed. "As if this one could kill me."

"Forgive me." Soleil said, her voice cool. "But I was under the impression we were allies."

"We are, sure." Annie said. "I'm just having fun."

She gave Soleil a playful shove on the shoulder. It took all of Soleil's willpower to not hit her back.

"Show some discretion, Milady." Oakley said, looking up at them with a frown.

"Where is Celia?" Soleil asked.

"Oh, she's shut up in the shelter." Annie said, shoving her thumb behind her at the shelter. "She's trying to get her old boyfriend to drive us away..."

The situation was not as poor as Minerva had suggested, Soleil surmised. Doubtless the Order of the Dragon was upset about the Windsor's involvement in this shelter, but if Annie's attitude was any indication tensions had not risen to the point where it would come to blows.

"Perhaps you can fill me in on what's happened while I've been gone?" Soleil suggested. Annie scratched her cheek.

"I- uh, I don't-"

"I can be of assistance, Madame." Oakley spoke up, wagging his tail. "Forgive me... my milady has no patience for politics."

"Shut up." Annie told him. "You're making me look bad."

Oakley let out a bark which Soleil was quick to realize was his version of a laugh.

"Follow me, my dear." He said to Soleil. "I will explain on the way."

"I'll stand guard." Annie said, as if she were trying to convince them that she was of use, as they walked away.

"Please forgive the insolences of my lady." The golden retriever told her, once they had gotten some distance. "She is known to be a tad rambunctious."

Soleil knew better than to share her opinion of Annie with her familiar: Everything she said would be relayed back to her without a second thought. The dog was even less trustworthy than the rest of them.

"It was no trouble." Soleil said. "I appreciate her hard work."

"I am glad to hear that." Oakley said. Soleil found herself certain that he too was being rather deliberate with his words. "We have worked very hard to make this place as secure as possible."

Secure for who? Soleil found herself wondering. The premises was protected by Windsor barriers and patrolled by Windsor Witches. Their supplies came from the Windsor, and undoubtedly they had begun introducing luxuries like books. Soleil may have liberated the girls here... but it was the Windsor who had given them a sense of security, and comfort.

In short, it was very likely that the women here would be more loyal to the Windsor than to her... if push came to shove.

"The Ignis are rallying their forces for an attack on Americana." Oakley was saying. "Even the Cattle now know: War is coming."

"How safe will we be here?"

"They intend to raze the entire country milady. As much as they can reach."

Soleil grimaced. "We cannot allow that to happen."

"Your thinking is the same as ours." Oakley told her. "We must rally our forces and do whatever we must to protect this land. The future of the state depends on it."

Soleil nodded, her expression grim.

"I will do everything in my power to stop them." Soleil told him. "Whatever it takes."

Oakley leaned into her, and she found herself patting his head. It was surprisingly soft and clean. Soleil had to remind herself that he was a familiar and not a true dog.

"Allow us to help you, Mrs. Freeman." The familiar said. "We have nothing but your best interests in mind."

Soleil removed her hand.

"I will fight alongside you all the same. For now."

The dog looked at her. It said nothing, but Soleil rather felt it was judging her.

They came to a stop outside Soleil's office, and the dog raised his paw and scratched at the door.

"Oakley, how many times have I told you-"

Celia blinked. Her eyes fell on Soleil. They were bloodshot and swollen. She hadn't gotten any sleep since she had left.

"Oh thank goodness you're back."

Celia led Soleil into the office and shut the door behind her, shutting out the dog entirely. She stumbled halfway back to the chair at the desk, and Soleil had to help her sit back down.

"Thank you." Celia rasped. "Sorry for taking your chair."

"No, don't apologize." Soleil said quietly. "What's happened?"

Celia rubbed her eyes. She looked distressed.

"Before you left, I had sent out a letter to the Order of the Dragon." She said. "It was a full report on the current state of the situation and all relevant parties. They... chose to send me reinforcements. And... Well..."

She shuddered somewhat, and shook her head.

"They got here last night." She said. "And..." She rubbed her eyes tiredly. "Oh, you probably think it's much worse than what it is... but one of the men who came here..." Her eyes began to brim up with her tears. "He was going to marry me!"

It took a very long time for her to calm down. She took in a deep breath and patted her eyes with her napkin.

"Forgive me." She said stiffly. "But you see... for the past twenty years... I longed for the day I would see him again. I fantasized about how he would come to rescue me, and now... I learn that he's married another."

"I'm sorry." Soleil said quietly.

"I'm so happy to see him again..." Celia said. "And I'm happy that he came to rescue me... but...." She let the words hang in the air. Soleil understood completely.

"I haven't spoken to them yet." Soleil said quietly. "I wanted to speak to you before anything else..."

"Yes... Yes they've been asking after you as well..." Celia said.

She swayed back and forth in the chair. Soleil briefly feared that she may fall.

"Get some rest." Soleil commanded her. "You've been working yourself to the bone."

"I don't-"

Soleil shook her head.

"You've done well." She said quietly. "I only wish I did not have to force so much on your shoulders..."

Celia bent her head over and was snoring gently in the chair. Soleil watched her carefully. She wasn't sure whether she should try to move her or not.

She ended up moving her to the cot in the corner of the room that she had been using, and then stepped out to find Oakley waiting for her.

"I take it that you want to meet with the Dragon Knights." He said. "This way."

Soleil dutifully followed the dog down the hall.

"The Lady Eilonwy has been very impressed with you all, you know. Not a lot of people have been able to thrive under the Igins."

"We've had help." Soleil said. She was sure that the dog was trying to pry her true feelings out of her.

They stepped into the kitchen. A woman she had never seen before was inspecting the cookware. She stood back up, surprised, and looked at her.

"You're not one of them." She breathed, as she stepped towards her.
"Are you... Soleil Freeman?"

"I am." Soleil said cautiously.

"Oh, it's a pleasure to meet you." The woman said, as she stepped forward and grabbed her hands. "I'm Dame Alisa Coghland... I've heard all about you, of course..."

"Alisa Coghland?" Soleil said sharply. "I've heard of you... You're a knight stationed at Grey Arcadia. You fought the New Red Army in 2012... and your grandfather is Bartholomew Coghland, the esteemed Machinist."

"Oh, you've heard of me?" Alisa said, sounding surprised. She looked a little flattered, and embarrassed. "I, uh, didn't exactly distinguish myself in the war-"

"Nonsense. All of you are heroes."

"I'm surprised a Catholic would think that." Alisa said, as she squeezed Soleil's fingers lightly. "But Celia tells me that you're not like most Catholics..." She smiled at her warmly. "I think we'll get along just fine."

She released her hand and turned back to the cookware.

"I was just doing a thorough investigation of all your household things." She said. "Just to make sure that it hasn't been contaminated or possessed and whatnot... You seem to have done a very good job getting rid of most things that might be dangerous."

"Most?" Soleil asked sharply. "What did we overlook?"

"Not overlook, exactly, but that vampire in the basement..."

Soleil nodded, her expression grim.

"I don't know what to do with her. I can't just kill her because she might have some valuable information-"

"Oh, we have someone who's going to take care of it." Alisa said brightly. "Ooooooh, I bet you'll be surprised."

"Surprised with what?"

A pair of arms wrapped around her from behind. She let out a short scream and almost elbowed the person grabbing her.

"Darling!" Charlotte Harker gushed. "It has been too long!"

"Charlotte! Do not-"

Charlotte held her more tightly, laughing, and Soleil had no choice but to relax. If she lashed out, she would easily kill her. It took her a good moment to settle down.

"I see that you two are close." Alisa said, smiling.

"Like sisters." Charlotte said, beaming, as she tried to peer out from behind Soleil's shoulder. Although Soleil was two years younger, she had grown much taller than she had since they were children.

"What are you doing here?"

"For the vampire, darling. The Order contracted my services as an expert."

She pulled away from her and beckoned her follow. Soleil quickly followed behind her. They reached the place where Goneril was stored, and opened the door. Several questions were running through her mind: before she could ask any of them, however, Charlotte turned and smiled at her. A shadow lunged down at her from above.

"Look out!" Soleil cried, as she stepped forward.

Charlotte turned back around.

The shadow hit the ground in front of them and then leapt backward, to the opposite wall. It scuttled up the side, as far away from them as possible.

"Hello, Goneril." Charlotte said pleasantly. "I see you didn't recognize me."

"S-stay away from me!" Goneril squeaked. Soleil stared at her. She had never heard her be so rattled.

"Get down here, you're embarrassing yourself."

Goneril slowly shuffled back down the side of the wall and stood to face them. Soleil stood there, staring, as Charlotte stepped forward and patted her cheek.

"You look well."

Goneril looked sickly from being fed nothing but emergency blood packs. Her skin was pale and clammy, and she looked significantly aged... more in her thirties than twenties. She glared at her, but said nothing.

"What have you been feeding her?" Charlotte asked conversationally.

"Blood Packs."

"I thought so." Charlotte sighed. She brushed her hair backward and exposed her neck. Goneril stared at it hungrily. "But she won't be able to fight in her condition."

"I wouldn't trust her too."

"But I do."

Charlotte squeezed her cheek and Goneril flinched, pulling away somewhat. She smiled.

"She will do what I ask of her." She said softly. "She has to." She turned back around and faced Soleil. "Leave her care to me." She said. "You have business to attend to... do you not...?"

"I do."

...

Eilonwy set the tea down in front of American and stood over the table, watching him carefully.

"It won't be much longer now." She said quietly, as he took the drink in his hand and turned it back and forth. "We will be going to war."

"We will never be more ready."

"That may be so." She said. "But if blood is shed... you know what that means, don't you?"

"The summoning will be expedited."

"That is correct." Eilonwy said, her voice heavy. "The instant this town goes to war... we can all rest assured that Ignis will soon rise."

"There will be no stopping it?"

"None." Eilonwy said primly. "The best we can do is send him back, at this stage."

"Can it be done?"

"Yes." She said. "Why do you think this world is not running amok with demons? It is perfectly possible to send them back. If you have the power."

"And do you?"

Eilonwy smiled.

"If I am not countered by other witches greater than myself... yes." She said. "Our objective if we wish to stop the summoning of Ignis..."

She tapped the table.

"Is to kill the Nine."

American stared at her.

"Madelyn, and I should be able to send Ignis back with the aid of the Order of the Dragon." Eilonwy said quietly. "But we need those nine to be killed."

"The Nine..."

American closed his eyes.

"Who are they?"

"They are among the most powerful creatures among the Ignis." Eilonwy said quietly. "They have devoured all those who would challenge them. Their power is absolute. It is they who have turned this place into what it is."

"They must be destroyed."

Eilonwy looked at him, but said nothing.

"Things have been bad here for a long time." American said coldly. The steam from his tea seemed to thicken, covering his face completely. "I've waited my entire life for this moment."

"It won't be easy." Eilonwy told him gently. "All of us may die."

"There are worse things." American said.

Eilonwy smiled softly at him. Her hand trailed near his, but before her fingers could wrap around them he stood up.

"We need to find the Castle." He said. "And we need to learn as much about the Nine as we can before the fighting starts." He gave Eilonwy a hard look. "I've spoken to Marlene.... She speaks of a place that all the Ignis fear, more than all others..."

"That must be their headquarters. If you could get her to give us the location..."

"We can invade them."

They stared at each other. Eilonwy felt her heart beating in her chest.

"American." She said. "This... is going to be dangerous. We will be the last line of defense between them and the entire state. If we fail- everyone living here will die."

...

American stepped into the dark house, Marlene asleep in his arms. He stepped through the door of the front door and locked it behind him.

"That won't be necessary. I'm already inside."

The voice came from the kitchen. Marlene shifted in his arms. She blinked.

"Go upstairs." American told her quietly. "Now!"

He set her down on the floor and she stumbled forward. She seemed a little bit confused. He strode off into the kitchen and slammed the door open.

The woman sitting in the kitchen light set down her cup of tea.

"Hello, American." His Mother said idly. He stared at her. He felt a whirl of emotions well up within him. He drew his gun and pointed it at her.

"Is that how you treat your Mother?" She asked idly, as she turned to face him. "Have a seat."

"Who are you?" American demanded. "How did you get in here?"

"I am your Mother and this is my house." She sat. "Sit."

American stared at her. "I thought you were dead." He said, his voice somewhat hoarse.

Her expression softened slightly.

"No." She said heavily. "I was in mourning." She waved to the seat in front of her. Without thinking, American holstered the gun and sat across from her. They stared at each other.

"Where have you been?" American asked, his voice tight.

"I could ask you the same question." Mother said quietly. "Until I spoke with Ramona I had no idea you had returned to Ignis. I had imagined you had fled the state. I was aware that Windsor Eilonwy had escorted you off of our territory, but-"

"So you are one of them." American said, his voice dark. "My wife warned me you might be, but-"

"Yes." Mother said. "Your father and I had a very wonderful life here due to the Ignis. Your father got to evade the federal government he hated so much.... And I got to start a family." She smiled wistfully.

"You've grown up so much."

American stared at her.

"But allow me to introduce myself." His Mother continued. "I am Ignis English.... The Voice of Ignis. And your opposing counsel in this conflict.

She raised the tea glass towards him, as if toasting him.

"Why?" American asked, bluntly. "How is this possible?"

English smiled at him.

"It's a very long story." She said quietly. "But I suppose what you really want to know is the circumstances of your birth." She sighed, and took a sip of her tea. "It is as you suspect. Your father and I met, in this settlement. He was seeking an out from what he saw as tyrannical government control... he killed a man for a good cause, but the courts declared him a criminal. The American government, as you know, does everything in its power to keep its citizens unable to fend for themselves."

American was staring at her. His lips were tight.

"I was born a witch, in this city." She said. "I had everything I could ever dream of."

She shuddered.

"One night with your father changed everything."

American sat, tight lipped. He was seriously considering shooting her right there.

"I had no illusions of romance." His mother said wistfully. "No thought of starting a family... and then... in less than a year... we had you."

She looked at him.

"Yes...." She said quietly. "We started a family. And when we did that... we sought to give you as normal as a life of possible. It was important for us... for you to have a normal childhood. For you to be free to choose for yourself whether you wanted to follow the Ignis or not."

She let out a soft, tinkling laugh. "I suppose you have made your choice."

American's hand clenched into a fist.

"Dad died because of your cult." He said coldly.

She nodded at him sympathetically.

"It is regrettable." She said. "But death comes for us all. I still mourn him, but when I look back at our time together, as a family..." A

smile tugged at her lips.

American drew his gun and aimed it at her. She did not move from her spot.

"You would shoot your own Mother?" She asked. "To avenge your father who would not want to be avenged..."

She took a sip of her tea. American's hand trembled, and he set the gun down on the table.

"You were the one who inducted Sinistra into the cult." He said quietly.

"Yes." She said. "Her parents thought they could exploit their daughter forever. I warned them many times that Sinistra would turn on them, but did they listen...?" She shook her head.

"You as good as killed them." American said hoarsely. She looked amused to hear this.

"Sinistra told us many times how much she wanted to kill them." She said. "At this very table, in fact."

That was true. American thought. He felt sick to his stomach. At the time he had thought that Sinistra was just a girl with a bit of an edgy sense of humor, but now...

"We had hoped you would get married, you know." She said. "We all thought she would be perfect for you. I was shocked when I heard you married another girl. Sinistra was very disappointed."

"Soleil is an amazing person." American said stiffly. "You'll meet her in battle soon enough."

"I'm sure." English said, sounding amused. "But Sinistra has told me that she intends to take her head herself. We shall see."

She set the cup of tea down and stood up. American followed suit, and was surprised to find how short she was.

"This is your last chance, my son." English said quietly. "Join me. Or you will burn along with the rest of the cattle."

"I can't bring myself to kill you." American said. "But I will destroy everything you stand for. I can promise you that."

"We shall see." His Mother said, with a sigh. "Oh, American... I am so proud of the man you have become."

She turned around. Her entire body burst into flames. It covered her body almost completely, burning it completely away. When the flame faded there was nothing else.

"Remember this, American..." Her voice reverberated throughout the kitchen. "You are free."

There was silence. She was gone. American stared at the spot she had disappeared. He reached forward, picked up the gun on the table, and stared at it.

"What good are you if I can't pull the trigger when it really matters...?"

"Daddy...?"

American placed the gun in its holster and turned around. Marlene was standing the doorway, blinking up at him childishly.

"I told you to go to your room." American chided. The girl blinked up at him.

"I could sense her..." She murmured. "I was... scared..."

He bent down and picked her up. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he walked her back up the stairs.

"Yes." American said heavily. "So was I."

"Is she going to kill you?"

He began to walk up the stairs.

"We're going to try and kill each other, I think." American said quietly. "To decide the future of this city."

"She's your Mother..." Marlene said quietly. "Soleil says... you shouldn't fight with your parents..."

"She's right." American said gently. "But sometimes we have to do things that we feel aren't right to stop a greater evil. I'm doing these things so that you can have a better life. This isn't about me, or her... this is about everyone around us."

Marlene said nothing more. She clutched at his chest with her hand as he set her down in her bedroom.

"I'm not sure I can sleep." She told him.

"I'll sit up with you until you do." American promised her. She smiled at him, and clutched his hand.

...

Soleil came home that night, her eyes narrowed.

"Someone's been here." She said immediately, as her eyes roamed over the kitchen. "Someone touched my tea."

She went over and picked it up, carefully examining it.

"Soleil..." American said slowly. "My Mother was here."

She stopped. She turned to face him. Her eyes were narrowed.

"She was one of them." She inferred.

"Yes." American said. "And not just one of the rank and file... she is the Voice of Ignis."

She stared at him. It was the most intense, calculating gaze he had ever received from her.

"And what did the two of you discuss?" She asked. Her words were precise, but American knew her so well that he could tell she was suppressing intense emotion.

"She wanted me to join the Ignis." American said. "I refused her."

Soleil did not relax. She was still staring at him with that calculating expression that he had seen countless times whenever she cornered her prey.

"Do you want to kill me?" He asked tonelessly.

"You're one of them." She said. "I married you." Her voice was hiding an intense, dark emotion.

"I would never have asked you to marry me if I had known." American told her, firmly. "I know how you feel about witches... about people like me."

They stared at each other.

"If I succumb to my true nature..." American said quietly. "I want you to kill me."

"You're terrible." Soleil told him. "Asking such a thing of me." Her voice broke. She sounded troubled. "We already agreed that we're going to purge Ignis from Marlene. I see no reason why the same cannot be said for you."

"It gets more difficult as you age." He said, his voice heavy. "And today I realized I will have to kill my own Mother."

She stared at him.

"You see?" He asked, his voice bitter. "To win we have to sink to their level. Killing our families to control the community. In the end we are no different than they. Nothing will change."

"Is that such a terrible thing?" Soleil retorted. "Man has been at war since the dawn of time. We have always fought amongst themselves to establish laws and order. This is no different! You are fighting your mother for a just cause. I know... because I believe in you."

He looked up at her. She nodded, placing her hand against her heart.

"The American Government has surrendered this land to the cult. You alone rose from the cattle to save it from itself. Because you understand the damage it has caused, to you and everyone around you. Destroying your enemies is not an evil act, American... even if that enemy is your own Mother."

She stepped closer to him, and placed her hand on his chest.

"Please..." She said. "Understand that nothing has changed. You simply know your enemy better. That is all."

He nodded, his expression set.

"Now." Soleil said. "We must focus on the task at hand. We must destroy the Ignis, and your Mother along with it."

...

Ichiro's hand gripped firmly around his bat. He was sweating. He raised it weakly and charged. The woman in front of him dove in front of him and slapped him aside. His Mother, poured herself a cup of tea as she watched from the porch.

"CRACK!"

The bat splintered uselessly in his hands. He took in a deep breath, and tried head-butting his opponent. But she moved forward and threw him to the ground with a slam.

"You're too strong." Soleil commented, as she stepped around him, eyeing him carefully. "You've never felt real fear in combat... have you?"

Takemura-san was watching from the front porch, tea in hand. She was staring rather intently as Ichiro tried to sit up.

"You have always simply overpowered your opponents." Soleil said as she stepped past him. He tried to lunge for her leg, only for her to quickly raise it and kick him square in the face. He was slammed to the ground in a heap. "Tell me." She rasped, as she pressed her foot down firmly on his face. "Do you feel fear?"

Ichiro squirmed. "Is that the feeling in my pants?"

Soleil stomped on his face more firmly, shattering his nose. Blood spurted out all over the grass.

"You must learn to feel fear." Soleil emphasized. "Your overconfidence is becoming a weakness. I will have to break you, over and over, until you learn you are not invincible."

She released him and watched as he slowly crawled to his feet.

"I- I think I' m in love..." He whispered. Soleil kicked him again, and he went rolling across the yard in a heap. By the time he stopped,

he was no longer conscious.

"Do not heal him." Soleil said to his Mother, who looked more amused by the outcome of the duel than anything. "He needs to learn this lesson."

"I agree." Takemura said quietly. "Would you care to have a cup of tea?"

"I would." Soleil said. "Perhaps I will be able convince you to join our cause."

Takemura placed a hand over her mouth and let out a sophisticated laugh. She turned, holding out her arm, and stepped back into the house. Soleil followed her.

Soleil found herself kneeling on the floor in the Japanese style and allowed Takemura to pour her a cup of tea. She did not touch it until Takemura kneeled down across from her.

"You have been to Japan?"

"Many times." Soleil admitted. "I admire your culture."

"Ha." Takemura scoffed. "Post war Japan is a shell of its former self. It has been brought to heel to the Americans... There aren't many of us real Japanese left." Her eyes flashed. "If my son marries that American girl, it will be the end of us."

Soleil nodded.

"I imagine it has only gotten worse since the Dragon of the West was killed."

"Ah." Takemura looked pleased. "You know of her, do you?"

"They say she was the strongest woman in the world." Soleil said quietly. "I always dreamed of testing myself against her."

"You would have regretted it, if you had." Takemura said quietly.

"Her power far surpassed those any of us in this city." She considered Soleil intently. "But I can see in your face that it does not deter you."

"I have nothing but respect for her." Soleil denied. "If I had such power- I could change the world."

"She would never have respected that." Takemura told her. "She loathed violence all throughout her life. When you reach such a level to surpass even the gods... you begin to fear your own power."

Soleil nodded.

"I have felt similarly." She said. "Even at my level, my actions dictate the fate of the world." She took a sip of her tea. "And as of late I'm now thinking about the next generation... the world I'll leave for my children."

"I wondered why you took such an interest in training Ichiro."

"He's one of the best we have." Soleil said tonelessly. "I don't trust the Windsor or the Sentinels, and the Order of the Dragon hasn't established itself enough in the area to be of much help. Your son very may well be our hero... if he is properly prepared."

"If." Takemura said dryly.

"It is not a matter of strength." Soleil said. "It is a matter of having values and being of good character."

Takemura chuckled.

"I can see why he likes you so much." She said. "He rather enjoys being bossed around by women..." She took a sip of her own tea. Soleil watched her carefully.

...

Windsor Madelyn had surprised American that day by, for the very first time, appearing on the doorstep to their house, Ripley at her heels. Ripley had been brought over to help socialize Marlene. They were sitting upstairs, pouring over books together as American and Madelyn sat in the kitchen and talked.

"Eilonwy and I have discussed this at length and we have devised a plan for you to grow in strength... prior to the final battle." Her eyes flashed. "Milady thinks with recent revelations that you should learn how to control your innate powers."

American sighed.

"Why haven't I shown signs of the Ignis?" He asked. "I share none of their characteristics... My fighting style revolves around fighting fire, not using it."

"Eilonwy wants to take the time to go over your personal history with you." Madelyn said. "It certainly is unusual... But if what your Mother told you was true, than she simply did not train you to utilize your powers, and they lay dormant. It isn't so unusual, even for Hellraisers... You have seen for yourself how those who unleash their powers too early tend to not know how best to handle it. Not having to work to obtain power has very real downsides."

"Will you be able to help me, though?" American asked. "The Windsor and the Ignis are so different..."

"We can help you understand what to expect." Madelyn said. "The behavior changes you'll undergo, basic conditioning to maintain your form... but when it comes to specialized training on how to achieve it or what to do with it, we cannot help you."

American nodded, his expression set.

"Good." Madelyn said. "I'll see you tonight. Ah... please tell your wife where you'll be. We don't want any misunderstandings. This isn't one of Poppy's Japanese cartoons."

Madelyn turned around, swishing her long green hair behind her back, and was gone.

....

Celia Rosenbaum raised the tea to her lips and considered the man sitting opposite her.

"I'm going to fight." She said tonelessly. "You can't stop me."

"I can, and I will." He said heavily. "You're in no condition to fight."

"I'm in no condition to fight at my best." She repeated to him, her voice slow and considerate. "But we do not have the luxury of waiting for me to fully recover."

"Then it is time for you to retire. Start a family."

"With who?" She asked. "You?"

There was a very awkward pause.

"I feel my age." Celia said, her voice bitter. "Even though my youth has been preserved, I know nothing of the modern world. How could I ever hope to be a good wife and Mother?"

"You'll find someone." Zachariah told her gently.

"Ha." Celia said tonelessly. "That someone was you. Once." She stared down at the table. "I'm a broken woman." She said quietly. "I'll never be whole again. Never."

"Celia-"

Before he could comfort her, the door opened. Alisa Cogland walked in, yawning.

"Good morning." She said brightly.

They both looked up at her, puzzled.

"It's four in the morning." Celia told her. "I haven't even been to bed yet."

"Oh, good." Alisa said brightly. "You can help me work."

"But-"

"Everyone else is still in bed." Alisa said firmly. She stepped forward and grabbed her arm. Celia had no choice but to get to her feet. "I need your opinion on our armory... what should we arm these girls with."

"But I-"

"Yes, that does need to be done." Zachariah said. "A lot of these girls are using whatever the Windsor hand them... we need to start stockpiling our own weapons. They may need to go to battle at some point."

"Yes... you're right, of course." Celia said immediately. Alisa wrapped her arm around hers.

"This way." She said cordially. Zachariah watched them go, smiling to himself.

"We haven't had much of a chance to talk." Alisa said. "We've all been rather busy. Zane and I know each other pretty well, but you-"

"I understand these are difficult circumstances." Celia said stiffly. "I imagine you don't trust me."

"Not at all." Alisa said quickly. "Zachariah has nothing but faith in you. You've done a wonderful job with this Church. Why, I imagine this place will grow into our primary headquarters in the area after we win."

"If we win." Celia said darkly. Alisa tugged at her arm.

"Don't be like that." She chided. "We've already secured this location, and we know the Windsor and the Freeman have their own places. It's only a matter of time until the Ignis' hold on the area is broken completely, and once that happens... parity will be restored."

Parity referred to the general state of the balance of nature. Without the Ignis artificially enabling a hellhole of degeneracy, the natural dichotomy between the natural world, humanity, and Americana would be restored.

"In theory we don't even have to defeat the Ignis." Alisa went on. "We simply need to upend their complete control. If we do that, people will have no choice but to live very good lives."

Celia walked along in silence.

"You forget that we're dealing with people who care nothing for morality." She said quietly. "They don't look at this land and see an opportunity to live an honest life. They see it as something to exploit. The Windsor know our enemy better than we do. I see no reason to doubt them on this matter."

"But if they are lying to us, though-"

Celia was shaking her head.

"You haven't confronted the Ignis yet." She said grimly. "You underestimate their evil. They are capable of doing much more than

you have yet seen.”

Her mind fell back to her time in the cryogenic chamber. She raised her hand to her mouth and looked away. She felt like she might throw up. Alisa tightened her grip on her arm.

“We can’t let ourselves be led around by the nose by the Windsor.” She said gently. “We have to keep our minds open to every possibility. It may be possible that the Windsor are the bigger threat here.”

“Careful.” Celia said quietly, trying to regain control over herself. “Anything you say may get back to them.”

Alisa nodded to show that she understood.

“But still.” She said quietly. “What is our evidence that the Ignis want to summon their Master? What is their plan exactly? Even if it is true... we still know very little.”

Celia bit her lip, deep in thought.

They stepped into the workshop. The place had initially been set aside for American’s use as he repaired the damage his wife had inflicted on the building during her battle with Daddy Nick, but Alisa had swept in and adopted it for herself. The rather simplistic tools and gadgets had been replaced with extraordinary things. Giant arm cannons that fired blasts of aura at enemies, enchanted gauntlets that enhanced one’s strength, and boots that could make one run like the wind.

“My specialty is machines.” Alisa said, as Celia bent over and picked up a cuckoo clock and examined it closely. The bird inside, she saw, was actually a gun that would burst out and shoot intruders. “But clothes are better for people who don’t know how to fend for themselves...”

Alisa’s nimble hands began to work at the table. Gears, springs, and scraps of metal were laid out in front of her.

“These are less extensive versions of my gauntlets.” Alisa explained. “Mine require a lot of skill and precision to use... but simpler versions

can be used by just about anyone. They're great for helping women outfight men in melee combat."

"I see." Celia said. "So wearing them increases your strength. Is that all they do?"

"They're also great armor... and considering we're up against the Ignis they're insulated against flame. So you should have no trouble reaching into flames with them on... if you feel the need to."

"Yours fire magical bolts."

"Yes, well, those are dangerous. It's powered by my own aura, and you can't overload them... they would explode. You have to have an insane amount of control. I have no trouble with it, but an ordinary person--"

"Do you think you could make something for me?" Celia interrupted. "Something that could help me restore my atrophied muscles?"

Alisa gave her a considerate look. "I'm not a doctor." She said at last. "And you have been getting healthier..."

"I've been working hard to get back into shape." Celia said slowly. "But with your help... I could expedite the process."

Alisa stared at her.

"Yes..." She said slowly. "I do not think it will be impossible..."

She brushed the gauntlets aside into a heap on the side of the desk and reached for a pen and paper. Celia stood over her, watching carefully.

"Your magical powers have not been impacted at all... it's your body that's been damaged... I think something skintight... Yes... Hmmm..."

They stayed up together discussing plans until long after the sun had come up. Celia was in the middle of discussing the various properties of her other accessories when she suddenly realized that the rest of the church was beginning to wake up.

"I'm sorry." Celia said quickly, as she stood up. "I need to get started on breakfast--"

Alisa waved her away.

"Go on." She said. "I have everything I need from you for now. Come back tonight and I'll show you what I've made."

Celia gave her a smile and made her way back upstairs. Alisa turned her head downward and continued her work.

...

Soleil returned home to find American already in the process of making dinner. She came up beside him and began to help.

"Ichiro's progressing well." She said quietly. "His rate of growth astounds me... I was not a fraction as powerful at his age."

American frowned at her. "I met you around then. I thought you were unbelievable."

"You weren't as strong as you are now." Soleil denied, shaking her head. "I simply overwhelmed you. That's all." She lowered the knife and began to chop the lettuce into little bits. "By the time Ichiro is the age I am now he'll have far surpassed me. I'm certain of it."

"You're just being humble. Surely you'll get stronger too?"

"I will have a family by then." Soleil said shortly. And then smiled.

American gathered up the vegetables into a bowl and carried it over to the table.

"It's weird hearing you talk about starting a family." He said. "I always thought you would be going on crazy adventures forever."

"There are more important things." Soleil said. "Family, and community... I didn't expect to fall in love with this place when you brought me here."

"We didn't expect to make so many friends."

"Yes... Friends." Soleil said, her voice slow and deliberate. "I... never had the chance to have any before. It's nice."

American set the bowl down on the table and looked up.

"Marlene! Dinner's ready!"

They could hear her padding down the stairs. She stepped through the door, smiling widely, as Ripley followed behind awkwardly.

"Oh." Soleil said, as she looked at the other girl. "I wasn't aware we had company."

"She's been helping Marlene learn how to read." American explained.

"We're reading Watership Down now." Ripley said politely.

"It's really good." Marlene said earnestly. "Dad, can we get a rabbit?"

"Absolutely not." Soleil said immediately. "Dante would eat it."

Marlene made a face.

"You're too young for a pet, Marlene." American said gently. "How about we take a trip together next weekend as a family, and see if we can spot some wild ones?"

Marlene glanced at Soleil, seemingly almost certain that she would say no to this as well.

"That sounds lovely." Soleil said. "Would you like to join us, Ripley?"

"Oh, I would love to." Ripley said. "But I would hate to intrude..."

"You're as much of part of the family as Marlene is." Soleil said firmly.

"Well, in that case, I will have to request permission from Eilonwy." Ripley said. "I'll ask her tonight..."

The four of them sat down at the dinner table and began to eat. They talked about a lot of things: Reading, Watership Down, and the Windsor.

"We really value our education." Ripley said pompously, as she adjusted her glasses. "It's strange to me how you're not literate at your age..."

"Our age." Marlene said, annoyed. "We're the same age."

"Are we?" Ripley asked. "What's your birthday, then?"

Marlene sniffed and turned away. Her parents had cared about her so little that they had never even bothered to celebrate a birthday.

She really had no idea when it was.

"Don't antagonize her, Ripley." Soleil said.

"You're right, I apologize." Ripley said immediately. "It's not something you can help... have you decided on when your birthday should be?"

They had decided some time ago that Marlene should pick out the date herself.

"No." She said, a little bit gruffly. "There hasn't been a day special enough."

"How about the day you were adopted?" Ripley suggested

"I was sick that entire week."

"Most people don't remember the day they were born...." Ripley said, a little bit reproachfully. "I think you're being a tad bit too particular."

"She's been thinking hard about it." American said. "It's really important to her. Give it time."

Ripley nodded. "That's all well and good... but what could possibly be as wonderful as the day you were born? What could be more special to you than that?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out." Marlene said. "I can't think of anything. It's driving me nuts." She glanced at Soleil, as if expecting to be reprimanded. "Nuts isn't a bad word, is it?"

"No."

Marlene smiled widely. A little bit of salad fell out of her mouth and onto the table.

"But you will be cleaning that up." Soleil said dryly. Marlene let out a groan as Ripley stood up to fetch a rag.

When the plates were cleared, and Yolanda cleaned up the mess she had made, Soleil began clean up duty as American surveyed the two girls.

"I think it's time to take you home." He said to Ripley. "You've been a big help."

"Come back tomorrow." Marlene pleaded. "Please?"

"Of course." Ripley said immediately. "We'll continue your lessons in the morning."

She adjusted her glasses rather pompously. American laughed at her.

"You should become a teacher when you grow up." He told her.

"You're really good at it."

"R-really?" She looked somewhat bashful. "You think so?"

The three of them made their way to the front door and to the car. Soleil ran the water across the dishes, cleaning them completely. She was smiling.

...

American pulled the car up the church to find Eilonwy up waiting for them.

"There you are." She said. "I was just getting worried."

Ripley hopped out of the car and curtsied.

"We had a lot of fun today, Eilonwy." Marlene told her from the backseat.

Eilonwy smiled at her as she took Ripley's hand.

"I'm happy to hear it." She said softly. "Have you eaten? Would you like to come inside?"

Marlene was about to accept, but American cut her off.

"We've just eaten Marlene."

"But I'm still hungry." She whined.

"You're still adjusting to your new diet." American told her. "You mustn't overeat."

Marlene pouted.

"It's difficult being a parent, isn't it?" Eilonwy asked mildly.

"It is." American agreed. "But we're handling it well. Soleil and I, I mean."

"Speaking of Soleil..." Eilonwy said. "Have you spoken to her about your ascetic training yet? I doubt she'll take kindly to you spending so much time with us..."

"She has a problem with me honing my Ignis nature." American admitted. "She thinks it'll doom my soul, or something."

"She isn't wrong." Eilonwy said. "If handled improperly you will lose your humanity... It won't be easy."

"Why is it okay for you to transform but not me?" Marlene asked suddenly.

"It's not okay." American told her gently. "This is a very bad thing for me. But I have to do it to beat our enemies."

He turned back to Eilonwy.

"When do I begin?"

"Tomorrow." She said. "Madelyn will see you at the shelter. Do not keep her waiting."

"I won't."

Eilonwy turned, tugging Ripley along by the hand. "Say goodbye to your friend, Ripley."

"Bye-bye." Marlene said, beating her to it. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Indeed." Ripley responded. "Good-bye."

The two walked away from the car.

"We're both learning new things." Marlene said immediately, as they set off down the road. "It's like you're growing up, same as me."

"Yes... I suppose we are."

...

Annie found herself carrying a large basket into the hills that day. It was filled with fruits and sandwiches.

"I feel like Little Red Riding Hood." She told Oakley. He let out a bark of a laugh.

"Does that make me the Big Bad Wolf?"

"Sure, if you want." Annie allowed. "But I suppose that means the people we're delivering the goodies too are the antagonists of the story."

"Or maybe the story is about the journey and not the destination."

Annie was about to respond, but an intense burst of wind shot out from the trees towards her. Being a witch aligned with the Windsors, this did not particularly surprise or bother her. Her short brown hair was blasted back, and she let out a laugh.

"Madelyn's going nuts, huh?"

A short walk later found them in the middle of a clearing. American was standing in the middle of it, surrounded by trees, his eyes darting every which way. He noticed Annie immediately, but he paid her no notice.

"He's working hard, isn't he?" Annie asked idly, as she sat down against a tree, setting the basket down next to her. Oakley loyally sat down next to her. She curled her bare toes into the dirt, enjoying the feeling of the earth.

Another intense blast of wind shot out from behind the trees. American let out a scream as he charged towards it, digging his feet into the ground. He struggled vainly against it, fighting with all of his might... before being thrown off his feet and through the air.

He slammed into the tree right next to them and slid to the ground.

"I've brought lunch." Annie said as American sat up, rubbing his face.

"Thanks." He said, grimacing. "But I need to do this."

Madelyn appeared out of nowhere from the trees behind them.

"No, you need to take a break." She said sternly. "Rest is an important part of training."

"And so is food." Annie said jovially. "Look, I cooked today..."

She handed him a sandwich.

Annie chose not to eat herself, as she and Oakley had eaten before they left the women's shelter. She found herself being the driving force of conversation today.

"How's training going?" She asked.

"Not well." American admitted. "My powers are repressed."

He held out his empty hand and clenched it into a fist.

"My nature runs contrary to Ignis ideology." He said. "I'm not inherently a selfish person, so..."

A burst of energy shot out from his fist. It was rather warm, but it wasn't true hellfire.

"You may be too old to transform." Annie said. "Plenty of people have demon ancestry and never manage to use it... It's a skill you're meant to develop over a lifetime." She shrugged her shoulders.

"Even I have never managed it."

"Because you keep cutting class, Annie." Madelyn said, somewhat sharply. Annie smiled ruefully, and scratched her cheek.

"Well.. y'know..." She wiggled her toes. "I kind of enjoy not messing up my feet, thanks..."

"You're a gunfighter, aren't you?" American asked. "How good of a shot are you?"

"Oakley?"

The dog stood up. He reached into the ether and pulled out ten paper thin targets. Annie took them and threw them into the air. They shot off in all directions, covering the entire clearing.

She wrapped a napkin around her eyes and turned away, as she drew a hand gun and aimed it with one hand.

BANG

BANG
BANG

She shot exactly three times. The shots swerved in mid-air, hitting three targets each before each of them converged to slam into the final target all at once.

"Woah!" American said, impressed. Annie grinned, as she undid the bandana. "That was amazing!"

"Thanks." Annie said, grinning, as Oakley took the gun from her and placed it back in the ether. "I do it by manipulating the air resistance... by controlling the air I can manipulate the bullet's trajectory."

"It's an amusing skill she's cultivated, but not one that's much use to us." Madelyn said. "At our level our aura pushes away bullets."

"I don't think so at all." American said. "If I could do that... that would really increase my chances."

"Are you asking me to mentor you?" Annie asked, bemused. She placed a finger on her cheek and considered him. "Well... I don't like the idea of teaching someone outside of the coven... but I like a guy who likes guns. So okay."

Madelyn fell silent, scowling silently.

"You already are a good natural shot." Annie continued. "All you need is mastery of the winds... the easy way to do that is to become one of us, but... uh, that isn't possible because we don't accept men."

"Even if I don't become as good as you are I'll take anything I can get."

"Excellent." Annie said. "I'll see you tomorrow then." She winked and stood up. She twisted her bare feet into the ground and stretched her chest and arms.

American was watching her go when Madelyn spoke to him again.

"Are you ready?"

American nodded and got to his feet. He winced at the pain his body was still in, but he regained his composure.

"Yes."

Madelyn watched him carefully, and then nodded.

"Very well. Again!"

...

"Your husband has been spending a lot of time with the Windsor Witches lately Soleil."

"Yes, I am aware."

"Aren't you concerned? Your husband spending time with such cute girls..."

"I'm not threatened." Soleil lied, as she brought the knife down on the table. It cut the cutting board in half. Charlotte giggled.

"You never could lie to me, you know." She said gently. She folded in hands in front of her and watched her closely. "I know you too well for that."

Soleil didn't respond.

"You're worried that he'll be upset with you if you express how much you hate working with the Noctis." Charlotte said. "You're allowing love to cloud your judgement, and it's bothering you."

"Stop it." Soleil said.

Charlotte's smile widened.

"I know you Soleil." She said quietly. "You haven't changed at all."

The door opened. Celia Rosenbaum walked inside.

"Oh, hello Soleil." She said, surprised. "I didn't know you had come by." She frowned. "You're not cooking for us, are you? Charlotte's on cooking duty."

"You don't want me to cook."

"You don't want her to cook."

Celia looked taken aback by this. "I don't think it's fair to the others..." She said. "But I'll let it slide this time. Just because Soleil has volunteered."

"Thank you." Soleil said. "You have just dodged a bullet." She brought the knife down again. Celia cast a glance at Charlotte, whose expression was unreadable.

"And where is Goneril?" She asked, a little bit exasperated. "You aren't just letting her wander around on her own again, are you?"

"She promised me that she wouldn't cause any problems."

Celia spluttered. "And you believed her?"

Charlotte's eyes sparkled. Celia scowled at her.

"You've been more trouble than you're worth." She said. "We had Goneril perfectly under control before you came here, and now--"

"You had her locked in a basement." Charlotte said dismissively. "Soleil was the only reason she was as restrained as she was."

"We need to focus elsewhere." Celia said quickly, changing the subject "Soleil, how is American progressing? Has he spoken to you about it?"

Soleil wrinkled her lips.

"I don't approve." She said. "The Windsor are up to something. I'm sure of it."

"Of course they are." Charlotte said. "They want to build a safe secure society... same as us."

Soleil turned around and gave her a hard look.

"Your hatred of the Noctis has always confused me." Charlotte said. "The skeleton of our society has always been a construct of Noctis values. Leaders like Amaris Yew have done far more for humanity than any of our leaders have--"

Soleil took a deep breath and tried to relax.

"This is not the time and place for the old argument." She said.

"I agree." Charlotte said, nodding. "But you must understand what that means? That the Windsor are our allies. Not the fair weather friends that you believe them to be."

Celia wasn't sure what to make of this conversation.

"You sound as if you are defending the monsters that would enslave humanity."

"I am treating them like people." Charlotte clarified.

She stood up.

"We must accept humanity's place in the world." She said. "Our position as the apex species on this planet will be short lived."

"You speak of the Rapture." Celia said. "The End of the World."

"Nothing so blight as that." Charlotte said. "I am not so ignorant to believe that this Planet's future revolves around humanity... we are simply the new gods of this planet. Nothing more."

Celia looked almost affronted. Soleil sensed that she had to stop a religious argument. "I daresay the two of you will have quite a lot to discuss when the time is right... but we must focus on destroying the Ignis."

"Yes." Charlotte said. "We must do everything we can... just as your husband must do every thing he can." Her gaze hardened. "Would you really be happy if he did not do everything he possibly could to stop the Ignis?"

Soleil closed her eyes.

"No." She said quietly. "I wouldn't." She bit her lip. "But I fear for him."

There was a heavy silence through the air.

...

"I've decided." Marlene said quietly to the crowd of people in front of her. "That I will tell you everything I know of the Ignis."

The small crowd surrounding her was made up of all the major players among the Freeman. American Freeman sat on a wooden

chair, his arms folded, as his wife Soleil stood dutifully beside him, her hands folded in front of her. Windsor Eilonwy stood behind Marlene, floating in mid-air. Just below her, her second in command Windsor Madelyn sat with a typewriter. She was hurriedly typing out the transcript of the meeting to send to their superiors.

Standing by herself in the corner of the room was Elsin Jillian, the Canadian ice witch. She held a giant pack of ice to her head. Next to them stood Charlotte Harker and Goneril Blackwell. Goneril had been forced into a leash and collar and forced to kneel by Charlotte's feet. Occasionally she would reach forward and scratch her head, like a dog.

Representing the Order of the Dragon was Zachariah. Representing the Women's Shelter was Celia Rosenbaum. They stood shoulder to shoulder, and perhaps someone not familiar with the proceedings would assume they were there to represent the same group of people.

And finally... representing the Diablo Bounty Company... sat Diablo. He sat with his feet propped up on the table and his hat lay across his face. He seemed to be asleep.

"Nine people control everything in Ignis." Marlene blurted. "And all of them can be found... here." She pointed a chubby finger at the map on the wall behind them. "It is... a castle. Full of the most dangerous monsters and traps... and all of the Nine live there, together."

"These are High Witches who at one point controlled territory all over the world." Eilonwy reminded the group. "Their powers perhaps surpass any one person here."

"It will be a flat out war." Celia said slowly. Eilonwy bowed her head.

"Indeed." She said. "We must strike hard, fast, and precisely. We must utilize every resource we have." She raised her hand and patted Marlene's head, who flinched. "This girl's knowledge will give us the edge we need over our enemies."

Marlene nodded. She felt very apprehensive. She barely understood what was at stake, but felt a strange sense of dread. She knew that

going to that castle was a death sentence... to think that anyone would go there was insane to her.

Eilonwy seemed to pick up on her thoughts, and again patted her reassuringly on the head. Marlene flinched slightly as a warm, soothing energy down her back and to her shoulders. It was a pleasant sensation, and suddenly she was smiling.

"Now." Eilonwy said, as she pulled away her hand. "Tell us everything you know."

Marlene took in a deep breath.

"There are Nine who rule over us all." Marlene said. "Eight High Witches... and one Voice."

American grimaced somewhat. He raised his hand.

"If we were to kill the Voice... would that be enough to destabilize the existing power structure?"

"It would." Eilonwy said. "But there are those among the Nine who would be far more violent than she. English is cruel, but her influence is what allows for the façade of normalcy in the city. Once she is killed, the other Eight would fight amongst themselves for power. Some of them would prove themselves to be far worse than English in every respect."

American nodded, his face set. Eilonwy continued to speak as she paced back and forth.

"English has one apprentice. A woman named Ignis Sinistra."

Soleil cast a look at American. He sat stony faced, his expression unreadable.

"It is said that she is a prodigy... the ideal Ignis witch." Eilonwy continued. "They say that she was groomed to be one while she was very young by the Voice herself."

Soleil placed a hand on American's shoulder.

"The other eight members of the nine are subservient to the voice. These witches command the cattle. They care for them, they raise

them, they prepare them for slaughter. They are Ignis Ninian, Ignis Kamura, Ignis Thorn, Ignis Arrakeen, Ignis Kiara, Ignis Francesca, Ignis Hilda, and Ignis Yvette."

Marlene glanced awkwardly back at Eilonwy.

"Yvette..." She repeated, puzzled. She had heard that name before...

"We should discuss each of these women in turn." Eilonwy said.

"Now... it is important to note that two of them are known to be outright opposed to the Voice's plans... Ninian and Kamura."

"Ninian I am familiar with." Zachariah said. "There have been many accounts among Knights of the Order of her ferocity in battle... she fought many of our men in Germany. She led a community of believers who were willing to die for their master. Due to their lack of numbers and changing social conditions, their influence slowly waned... And then she vanished."

"Then she must have fled here."

Zachariah nodded.

"That is what we believe, yes." He said. "The Order believed the Ignis were on the verge of extinction--"

"They are. If they lose this city they lose everything." American said sharply. "In the grand scheme of things they are a dying culture."

"Correct." Eilonwy said, nodding. "Their influence is very limited outside of this town's borders... they have consolidated all of their resources in the hopes of summoning their master here. Either they destroy the world or perish in a glorious last stand... for English, both options are appealing."

"But not for Ninian." Zachariah said. "She believes that the Ignis should preserve itself... hers is a more conservative line of thinking."

American spoke:

"And what of Kamura? She too opposes the Voice?"

"Indeed." Eilonwy answered. "She, like Ninian, fears extinction. She has already seen her people die out once. She knows better than

most what that is like."

"What of the others?" Celia asked. "Do we have any knowledge of them at all?"

"Arrakeen."

The group turned to see Jillian push herself off the wall.

"She's the one responsible for this region's unusual climate."

"You're sure about this?"

Jillian nodded.

"She was born in a vast desert... from a mother who succumbed to the elements. With her first breath she devoted herself to Ignis for survival... and became a witch."

There was a heavy silence.

"A children's story." Charlotte said softly, her eyes flashing.

"It's true." Soleil said darkly. "I too have heard tales of her..."

"So she can make it warmer. How is that a big deal?"

"For an Elsin, this endless summer weather is unbearable." Jillian said. "I daresay when we meet the Ignis in battle the conditions will become unbearable for you, as well. She must be destroyed as quickly as possible."

Eilonwy nodded.

"Indeed."

Celia spoke:

"There was a woman who frequented the Church..." She said. "Her name was Ignis Kiara. According to Isobel she wanted virgin women for ritualistic purposes. Do you have any idea of what they could be?"

"Her." Eilonwy said, her voice disdainful. "She takes virgins and offers them up to Ignis. She lures them in with a false sense of security. She pretends to care about them. And then she summons forth her master to defile them."

Goneril licked her lips. "Hmmm... virgins."

Charlotte tugged on her leash, causing her to gag.

"Ignis doesn't strike me as the type to care about a woman's chastity." Charlotte said disparagingly.

"He doesn't." Eilonwy responded. "But the blood of virgins have very special properties... and in Ignis they are in very short supply. Doubtless Kiara has taken it upon herself to ensure that desirable girls are set aside for their master."

Eilonwy glanced down to make sure that Madelyn was still taking notes. "Ignis Thorn is an anomaly." She said. "We really don't know anything about her at all. She seems to have a strong association with plants, but for a woman that's contracted to a fire demon that's very unusual. We think she might not be completely human... perhaps some dryad or forest nymph ancestry."

Diablo looked up.

"Or she could be part demon." He suggested. "And then contracted herself to another demon. That can happen."

"Perhaps." Eilonwy said. "Regardless of what she is, though, she is extraordinarily dangerous... they all are."

"We know Francesca is a daughter of Ignis." Madelyn said, without looking up from her notes. "As is Yvette and Hilda."

"Daughters?" American wrinkled his nose. "I thought he saw them all as his wives?"

"They are." Eilonwy said. "He marries and impregnates his own daughters quite regularly... Many demons do. They don't look at things the way we do-"

"The way humans do." Soleil said, unusually sharply.

"The Windsor don't commit to such practices." Eilonwy said smoothly.

Soleil's hand clenched American's shoulder so hard that he thought it might break.

"But you do fall in love with married men... don't you?"

"We mustn't get caught up in petty cultural differences." Eilonwy said quickly. "We are all on the same side here, after all." She turned around and floated upward. Pretty sparkles floated from under her cloak.

"I don't think calling her out in front of everyone is going to help." Charlotte told her wryly. She pulled on Goneril's chain to pull her back a couple of inches. She had slowly been sliding closer to Soleil over the past several minutes. Soleil was about to reprimand her before Eilonwy came to a stop.

"That is everyone among the Nine..." She said. "Now, perhaps we should discuss those of significance of-"

"Ignis himself." Marlene whispered.

The room went dead silent.

"Ignis?" Eilonwy repeated, her expression becoming somewhat vacant. "You mean...r-"

"There is a girl." Marlene said quietly. "Who Ignis has possessed..." Eilonwy let out a deep breath of air.

"So." She said. "We are in need of an exorcist. Is anyone here...?"

There was a dead silence.

"Does this woman have a name?" American asked, leaning in closer to Marlene. Marlene wrinkled her nose and thought for a bit.

"Cordelia Rosenbaum."

Everyone turned and gave a startled look towards Celia. Her eyes were wide as she stared at Marlene.

"Rosenbaum?" She repeated. "That's my last name..."

Zachariah's eyes flashed. "Your sister was taken by the Ignis alongside you. If she had a child while with them, then-"

"I may have a niece." Celia said quietly. "They're using my niece to..."

Celia clenched her hand into a fist. Without another word she turned and walked out of the room.

"Please, excuse us." Zachariah said, bowing to the group politely before quickly following her.

"There is more to discuss, of course..." Eilonwy said to the room.
"But I think we should adjourn for now."

There was a scraping noise throughout the room as everyone got to their feet. American turned to Soleil.

"What do you think?" He asked quietly.

"Taking on nine such powerful witches with our numbers is suicide." She said. "And those are just the ones we know about... who knows what else could be lurking in that castle?"

"Soleil's always been kind of a cynic." Charlotte told them, as she wandered over. "Stand, Goneril." She commanded, tugging on the leash, and Goneril got up off of her hands and knees and stood. "I think we have a very good chance."

"Says the woman will be watching the battle from afar." Soleil said snidely.

"We must all play to our strengths." Charlotte said airily. "Without me Goneril wouldn't be joining you at all."

"You'll be fighting with us, Goneril?" American asked her.

"Anywhere's better than here." Goneril said gloomily. She let out a yelp as Charlotte tugged on her collar.

Diablo approached them.

"Charlotte's right." He said. "We have better odds than they do... if we stop Ignis from being summoned we don't necessarily have to take the castle."

"Yes, but surely any one of the nine have the ability to perform the necessary steps to perform the summoning." Eilonwy said, as she floated over to them. "Remember... it is essential that we destroy every single one of them."

American and Soleil bid their good-byes to their friends as they left, arm in arm.

"How's Ichiro doing?" American said quietly, as they headed back to the car.

"He's nowhere near his peak." She said slowly. "If the situation wasn't so dire... I would never send him into combat."

American grinned at her. "We were younger than he is now when we started."

Soleil turned a bright shade of red.

"You're right, of course..." She said quietly. "It's just... he's the first person I've ever trained and.... It feels nice. I never thought I would be a teacher."

"You once told me that you imagined that you could never be a wife and a mother." American told her gently.

She nodded.

"Yes... I did." She said. "I suppose... I've grown up." She glanced towards American. "We both have."

They stopped right in front of the car and turned to face each other.

Soleil chewed her lip and stared at him thoughtfully.

"When this is over..." She said slowly. "Let's spend a lot of time together... alright?"

...

Eilonwy glanced upwards at the sky.

"It's time." She said quietly.

"The Eclipse won't be for another four years." Madelyn said. "Why are they doing it now?"

"If they wait any longer we'll pick them off one by one." Eilonwy said quietly. "Their most loyal followers are collapsing..."

They stared at together at the darkened sky.

"We have no choice." Eilonwy said heavily. "The raid must begin now."

"I'll call Minerva." Madelyn said.

"Please do." Eilonwy said. "And once she is done, have her warn the outside world... Indianapolis should do. The Cattle should know that something is wrong. The instant they feel threatened... that is when their wrath will descend upon this small town."

Her lips curled into a twisted smile.

"If only they had joined us sooner... all of this could have been avoided."

Madelyn said nothing. She simply bowed her head and stepped away. Eilonwy stood on top of their little church, staring out over the red sky. Thunderclouds began to roll out over the sky and covered the city in darkness.

"O, Hated Ignis." She said. An explosion of thunder rocked from the sky, and her voice reverberated through the entire land. "Your time is nigh! Repent thy sins and prepare to face the Lord, for you will be meeting Him very soon..."

The police station was bustling with activity. The cops, who had spent the past several weeks preparing for war against American Freeman, suddenly found themselves staring up at the sky, slack jawed. Many of them had never even seen Windsor Eilonwy in person- to them, she may as well be the God that she spoke of.

The Ignis Courthouse was a different matter. The Judge, Gerhman Karma, was sitting with his back to the wall. His beautiful secretary stood over him with a rifle. Chris Kreeese, the most dangerous cop among the Ignis, was standing before him. The Judge, who had spent his eighty six years presiding over all of the evil in Ignis, bent his head.

"If we do meet God.... We will kill Him." He rasped.

In the Church of Ignis, where worshippers gathered to learn how to best commit evil in the world, the High Priest Osmund Salazar paced

back and forth in front of his congregation, speaking wildly.

"The High Witch Windsor Eilonwy has spoken!" He declared. He brought forth his staff and a great flaming serpent. "She seeks to destroy our very way of life, to serve her own master and the Christian god!" The eyes behind the mask glinted with an evil flame. "To protect our absolute freedom... they must all be destroyed!"

The High Witch of Indiana, Ignis Ramona, stood staring up at the cloudy sky with a steely gaze.

"Nothing will stop what is coming." She breathed. "Freedom or death. Is this what you wanted... English?"

In the castle of Ignis, where the Nine Dwelt, The Voice herself presided over the crowd assembled below her.

"Do as you will." The Voice spoke to them, her voice ringing out loudly and clearly. "Today will be the day you will all stop taking your freedom for granted... and learn that it must be fought for. If you do not--"

Intense flames shot out from the nine pedestals, before quickly dying out.

"We die." English said simply. "Do not think you will be protected. Do not think that you will slip through the cracks and survive. You will stand your ground and fight, to the last man, woman, and child."

She raised her arms, and the other members of the nine raised them in suit.

"For Freedom!"

Eilonwy's voice rang out one last time, so that everyone could hear her.

"It is time." She rasped. "To war!"

...

The siren declaring that the city was being invaded by hostile forces rang all around the police station. Ignis' police force, used to an extremely lax everyday routine, struggled to meet the demands of

their superiors. More than one man struggled to don the specially made riot armor that was meant to defend against the police from other departments, and others sat around in the break room table, insisting that they couldn't fight without first having their coffee and doughnuts. When one man suggested that he was simply too tired after a long night of raping a secretary over and over again, he was shot on the spot and his body was strung up as a warning to the other officers.

The unit began to be more cooperative after that.

By the time the first responders were armed and ready to go, they were equipped with enough weapons to take on the United States military. They smirked under their helmets, as they marched out into the street-

BANG

BANG

BANG

The entire row of first responders fell on the spot.

"What?" The captain roared, as he brandished his one weapon.

"Wha-"

Bang

Bang

Bang

The cops had not expected an ambush: they stumbled in place, fighting to get back inside under cover as shot after shot rang out around them.

"What is this?" The captain roared, brandishing his baton. "Find the ones responsible for this! Make them suffer! Burn them a-"

The next bullet caught him squarely in the head and he collapsed in a heap, causing another man to trip on his body and break his neck on the stairs.

Some distance away, the women of the Women's shelter stood under cover, rifles raised. There was a grim expression of determination on each face. Many of them had been victims of the police's cruelty. More than one of them had gone to the police expecting help, but instead had been raped and turned into slaves.

"Alright ladies... fire!"

The next round of bullets slammed into the police, sending them all to the ground.

Judge Karma sat in his chair in the courthouse, his eyes closed.

"The battle has begun." He rumbled. "I can sense it."

He gripped the arms of his chair with his wrinkled hands. The Secretary standing behind him adjusted her coat, and pulled out the large assault rifle she had tucked away behind her back.

"If you are going to shoot me, be done with it."

The woman had raised the gun and pointed it at his head.

"You believe that killing me will stop this?" Karma rumbled. "No... the world doesn't change. All it does is turn."

The woman pulled the trigger. The Judge's head exploded into blood as he collapsed on top of his desk.

The woman lowered the rifle as the door burst open. Locals who had long been oppressed by the Ignis swept inside, pitchforks and torches raised.

"Finally..." The woman murmured to herself, as she stared down at the body of the old man. "Finally..." Her eyes were brimming with tears. As friends, people she had never met before in her life came up to her and congratulated her.

Legions and legions of the Ignis faithful stood in front of the Castle. Those who could perform magic stood several rows behind those who could not.

"Stand tall! The Enemy approaches!"

The Legions stiffened and readied their weapons. Over the horizon, they could make out a number of shapes. One of them was far larger than the others...

"It's an elephant!"

And so it was. As the elephant came into view, it loomed over them, glaring down at them with hateful eyes.

"Humans." It rumbled. The legions froze in place, eyes wide in terror, as their eyes flitted upward to its back. A woman, encased in a giant cryogenic chamber strapped to its back, stared down at them through the ice.

The elephant charged forward. The sheer size and ferocity of the animal bowled them all over. Those with magic tried striking from a distance... but the witch encased in ice blasted out spikes of ice out of the air to pierce their heads before they could even move.

"Colonel Jameson." She said. "As long as this cryogenic chamber remains intact, I will be able to protect you. If it is broken..."

"We die." The elephant chuckled darkly. "And a glorious death it will be, fighting for my people!" It stomped its foot, crushing a man under his foot. More shards of ice shot out from the air.

"Our people." Jillian said. "Never forget that you are not the only one at risk of extinction, Colonel! It's do or die!"

Above them Ignis English watched them, her eyes narrowed.

"So it has begun." She said quietly. "O, beloved master... seep in this chaos and revel in it! For it will be my last and greatest offering to-"

She stopped. She paused, and then glanced upward. She caught a glimpse of a car floating in mid-air above her and a bright yellow flash descending upon her. A black blur leapt up from behind her to counter it.

"Oh no you don't!"

Sinistra darted forward and with incredible force launched herself at the other woman and caught her in mid-air. Soleil reeled backward, tumbling over the side of the building as Sinistra snarled, the force

of her flames propelling them to spin around in mid-air. They fell to the battlements below, fighting and clawing each other.

The car soared downward.

"Hey mom." American said pleasantly.

"Greetings." English said idly. "Your wife just tried to kill me."

American raised his gun and shot at her. She tilted her neck to the side and avoided it.

"You've grown some steel." She said approvingly. "But it won't work..." She began to sink downward into the floor of the castle. American watched her disappear, his eyes narrowed, and then wheeled the car around back to the battle.

Windsor Eilonwy landed on top of the car and stood on top of it, her cloak billowing around her.

"Just like old times." She chirped. She spun around and struck a pose. The bullets that were flying up at them from below by the legion were thrown off course by her magic.

"English got away, and Soleil's busy with Sinistra."

An intense burst of flame shot up from inside the castle.

"At least that's taken care of." Eilonwy said lightly. "I suppose you and I must do our part now."

American nodded.

He landed the car in front of the gate and spun it around. He pressed a button on the dash, and two missiles shot forward and blew it open. Before the smoke had even cleared, they were through the gate.

Eilonwy stood on the hood of the car, her eyes narrowed, as hordes of demons came at them. With expert precision six blades made of pure wind cut through those of which who leapt at them, while a number of bullets shot from the car at every angle tearing into the rest.

The rest of the forces ran through the hole that he had just blasted through. Celia Rosenbaum in her bright battle gown, her war fans at the ready. Zane, looking positively fierce some with his glowing swords. Windsor Annie, with a machine gun in hand and her familiar Oakley at her heels. Ichiro Takemura, who had traded in the old baseball bat for a genuine Kambuto, and an bright blue oni mask that covered his face. And all of the other friends they had made these past few months.

"And it is all thanks to you." Eilonwy said softly. "Thank you, American."

The assembled force turned around the hall.

"This place..." Ichiro murmured. "It looked smaller on the outside."

"This is a place of Chaos." Eilonwy explained, as she stepped off the hood of the car and came to face to them. "If we were to leave now, this place would vanish and re-appear elsewhere, with a completely different layout. We cannot afford a full retreat until all of the Nine have been exterminated."

She turned around, her cloak billowing around her.

"We must split into teams and plot out the territory." She said. "We-"
"Raaaaaagh!"

The stone walls burst down. A giant beast, with thick bulging forearms and a wide gaping jaw, stumbled through the door. American hit the accelerator on his car and barreled into it. The beast lunged forward, grabbing it with its bare hands, and lifted the front of the car off of the ground. American leaned out of the window, drew his gun, and fired.

The thing exploded, dropping his car and allowing him to barrel further deeper into the castle. Dante sat in the backseat, his tail thumping enthusiastically as wave after wave of demons lunged at them- only to be caught off guard by the car's automatic defense system that honed in on each of them and wiped them out. Following behind him the group made their way deeper into the castle, fighting with the stragglers and each going his or her

separate ways. Above them the walls of the castle were beginning to shudder and shake.

The battle had begun!

Soleil

The two of them tumbled through the air. Sinistra snarled at her as the flames spurting from her spun them round and round in mid-air. Soleil tried keeping her focus, in spite of the increasing speed of their momentum, as she adjusted herself accordingly.

She slammed Sinistra against the stone battlement below, shattering into pieces. But the break in momentum gave her enemy enough time to swing her leg around and knee her in the stomach. The blow likely could have shattered diamond, but Soleil did not flinch.

"What are you?" Sinistra rasped at her.

She thrust her legs outward, and intense flames sprouted from them. She shot them back towards the castle, and slammed her into the stone wall.

The wall shattered, falling to pieces around them. Soleil found her footing and grappled with her, pushing back against the force of her flames. They glared at each other.

"Do you think you're better than me?" Sinistra asked.

"My husband does." Soleil said quietly. Sinistra let out a scream of rage and the flames intensified. Soleil expertly stepped aside, allowing Sinistra to be thrown off balance, before throwing her to the ground.

"Ack!"

The instant Sinistra hit the ground she was already spinning to her feet: The flames shooting out of her body kept her on balance and on the offensive. She land on a single foot, and angling the blast of flame, spun around in a wide circle and tried to clobber Soleil's head with a vicious kick.

Soleil blocked the strike, stopping her dead in her tracks, and then threw herself at her. Sinistra had to stop herself from screaming in pain as Soleil's fist connected squarely with her face, sending her slamming to the floor.

The flames from her body erupted. They fired off in all directions, trying to get her away from her attacker as Soleil raised her fist for another punch. Sinistra was being restrained so thoroughly that she had no other choice, but to adjust all of her fire towards Soleil to try and get her off of her.

As Sinistra had feared, her flames rolled off of Soleil's skin like water. Her enemy had hardened her body beyond human limits, and mere flame would not stop her from what was about to happen next.

"CRACK!"

Sinistra felt her skull split open. The blow was so hard that it shattered the solid stone floor beneath them and again sent them tumbling downward. Sinistra triggered the flame jets again, and through the haze of the pain in her head she realized something:

I have the advantage over her in the air.

Grimacing, she tried to stop their downfall. Soleil, however, noticing her shift in position, attacked her opening. Sinistra gagged, spitting fire out of her mouth, catching Soleil straight in the face. A lock of Soleil's hair fell out of place.

Good. She isn't invincible.

She increased the force of her jets, changing direction sharply. Soleil was dragged through the air, grimacing. Sinistra darted all through the air, trying to throw her off balance. Soleil tightened her grip more strongly around Sinistra's sleeve.

A stroke of inspiration hit her, and she burned it away with her jet. Soleil's eyes widened as her hold on her tore to bits, and she was flying through the air. Sinistra smoothly shot forward, behind her shoulder, and struck out at her.

In mid-air, Soleil couldn't move nearly as quickly. She took the hit and shot upward. Sinistra shot up after her and hit her again. Soleil spun around in mid-air. Sinistra moved in for a third strike, but Soleil extended her leg to kick out at her face.

Sinistra had to swerve to avoid it, and Soleil quickly folded her body back to fall back to the ground.

Sinistra had known that she was a dangerous opponent, but for the first time she found herself marveling at her opponent's intelligence. She had been forced into a bad position and had immediately corrected it. This would not be a woman she could simply overpower.

Both women fell to the ground and landed on their feet. They stared at each other.

"This is fun." Sinistra said. She felt her heart race in her chest, and she found herself smiling. No one in the Ignis had ever really pushed her power.

Soleil's expression remained blank as she took a fighting stance.

"Tell me about yourself." Sinistra said, as they began to circle each other. "How often does American blow your back out?"

"What?" Soleil's brow furrowed.

"How often do you have sex?"

"Never."

"N-"

Sinistra's smile faded from her face.

"I see now that I HAVE to kill you." She said. "For American's sake, if nothing else."

Soleil's expression became one of pity.

"There is much more to love between a man and a woman than you have been led to believe." She said. "You've never been in love... have you?"

They charged at each other and clashed. The resulting force caused the air around them to ripple and the stone to shatter.

Persephone

Persephone wrapped the rainbow colored cloak tightly around herself as she stepped after the car. After the group had made short work of the initial assault, Elsin Jillian had established a fortress of ice at the base of the castle. The Colonel stood guard, protecting her as she cooled the surrounding stone.

Even now, the castle was extraordinarily warm. The further she walked away from Jillian, the warmer it became.

"I barely notice it." Diablo told her, as he let out a large drag on a cigar. "Neither, I'm sure, does American."

"Good for you both then." Persephone said. Privately she wondered whether or not she should have simply stayed by Jillian.

A door to the side of them burst open. A man with a sword crashed out, screamed at them, and lunged forward. He was on fire: Diablo reached for his shotgun and blasted the man back. He exploded.

"They're not sending their best." He said with disgust.

He stepped forward to investigate the room that the man had come from. Persephone stepped after him, her eyes narrowed.

"Wait a moment-"

Diablo stepped through the door, and instantly it slammed shut behind him. Persephone cursed, and raised her leg and kicked.

The wood shattered to reveal a perfectly intact stone wall.

"Great." Persephone said. "Just great."

She could hear gunshots and fighting in the distance, but she knew it was not in her best interest to confront the rabble. She needed to find the Nine.

"If I was an evil ugly Witch... where would I hide?"

She put her finger on her chin as she stepped forward. She found a set of stairs and climbed them upwards. She entered the new

hallway, and glanced out of the window. Below her she could see a vast, beautiful garden.

"Thorn..." She murmured to herself. "It has to be."

There was no glass in the window: She simply placed her boot on it, lifted herself up, and drifted down, her cloak billowing wildly behind her.

She touched down in the garden, and kneeled, her eyes keenly probing the surrounding area. Of course Thorn would be on ground level... she would have to be in order grow her plants. She stood up, her cloak wrapped around her.

A large, giant flower slowly turned her way. It opened its petals, as if beckoning her to come closer.

"I don't think so." Persephone said. She recognized it immediately... it was an Amazon Man-Eater. It was essentially a giant venus flytrap, but for people. They weren't native plants. Doubtless Thorn had several more at her disposal.

She quickly stepped off of the grass and onto the stone paveway. Small, individual blocks about a foot long created paths all throughout the garden. She stepped on them lightly, taking in the garden. It was peaceful.

"This is no place for a little girl." A voice said smoothly.

Persephone stopped mid-step.

"I'm a little too old to be called a girl." She said. "Are you Ignis Thorn?"

"I am."

The little blue flower next to her was moving its petals, as if it were speaking. Persephone leaned in closer to get a better look at it.

"Come out so I can kill you." She said.

The flower giggled. All around her a number of flowers were giggling. Persephone straightened herself as a vast, poisonous gas began to seep out of the stems towards her.

"You should have known better than to challenge me." Thorn whispered. Persephone quickly took in a deep breath, reached into her bag, and pulled out her re-breather- a mouth piece that could help her breath underwater, and poison. She placed it in her mouth and over her nose and took in a deep breath. A clean, breath of air entered her lungs.

"I see." Thorn said. "Perhaps you are not so ill-prepared after all..."

The little flowers began to sway back and forth, chanting in an ethereal latin. She cast glances back and forth, trying to decide where the Witch herself was waiting, but there was nothing.

She would have to go on the offensive. She flung her hand forward, and a splash of oil covered the plants. They recoiled in fear and loathing as she twisted her wrist, and an intense spout of fire followed.

The oil caught flame, and the plant with it. Persephone watched, grimly, as the plants sat in place... completely unaffected.

"Using fire against an Ignis Witch is ill-advised, Child. Even if that Witch is a child of Demeter..."

"Demeter?" Persephone wrinkled her nose.

"It's true." Thorn whispered. "It is why I have such an affinity for plants, you see..."

Persephone turned around. The Amazon Man-Eater had its petals wide open. The ground below it was shifting- it was coming straight for her. Persephone glowered at it.

The Man-Eater let out a shriek as began to wither and shrink.

"W-what?" Thorn asked, completely taken aback. "No- it can't be-" Persephone turned around and took in a deep breath.

"The season has changed." She said slowly. "It is now Autumn..."

The plants all around them began to wither and die. They curled and shriveled up into nothing.

"No... this isn't-"

"It amused me to hear that you claim to be descended from Demeter." Persephone said quietly. "Because my ancestors believed much the same. That our ancestry could be traced back to the lord of the Underworld, Hades, and his wife, Persephone!"

The plants began to shrivel and wither away.

"My claim to Olympus would be greater than yours... if it was true." Persephone sneered. "I don't believe in gods. But there's no denying that I do seem to have an uncanny knack for killing plants this time of year... Much like Demeter was said to have, whenever her daughter was taken back to the Underworld!"

The entire garden was shriveling away. Persephone could make out the clear outline of a woman, hidden deep within the recesses of a giant plant. Oil and fire wouldn't work... but water would.

"AGGGGH!"

The blast of water from Gear's water pistol hit the Witch square in the eye, right as the petals peeled away from her. She stumbled, as Persephone shot her again. She recoiled, holding up her hands as Persephone advanced, her weapon held firmly in her hand. The plants around them had become shriveled and weak. They were dead. Thorn's hair long, red hair had become disheveled and had fallen across her face. She stepped backward, trying to get some distance from her, as Persephone fired another shot-

Thorn glowered at her through her bright red hair. The entire garden caught fire. Persephone let out a shriek as she stepped back, wrapping her brightly colored fire proof cloak more tightly around her to protect herself from the flames. She stood there sweating as Thorn glowered at her.

"You are certainly a child of Hades and Persephone." She said derisively. "I suppose in the eyes of the gods we are kin. Make no mistake, child... I take great pleasure in doing this to you."

New plants shot out from the flames and lunged towards her.

"My plants thrive in fire." Thorn said, as the vines wrapped around Persephone's body, restraining her arms and legs. Persephone

struggled, trying to break herself free, as she was lifted into the air as the plants grew larger and taller. Persephone grimaced. If she killed the plants now she would fall into the flames, face first.

Thorn smiled at her. She seemed to grow in size as she stepped towards Persephone. She smoothed out her long red hair with her fingers as she stared at Persephone. She stood very close to her, and then suddenly lunged forward, grabbing the right half of Persephone's face. She screamed, as an intense flame erupted from her fingers and burnt away her skin. Thorn stopped, admiring her handiwork. All of the face was as it was before. But the second half... was disfigured beyond repair.

"Tell me." She said. "Tell me your name, before I kill you."

Persephone took in a deep breath.

"I am Persephone the Great." She rasped. "I'm a Magician."

She tilted her head forward, and the hat on top of her head began to fall off. A large, white something leapt out from inside. Thorn threw her fist forward to catch it, and found her fingers clutching a bright white rabbit.

"Wha-?"

Persephone twisted her shoulder, and with an expert precision that came from years of training in escape artistry, broke her binds. She lunged forward, bright white knife in hand, and stabbed Thorn right in the neck.

"Ah!" The flames died almost instantly.

Thorn dropped the rabbit. It plummeted down several feet and landed harmlessly in the burnt grass. It perked up its ears and stood up, before bouncing away.

Thorn struggled vainly, her fingers trying to claw out Persephone's eye, as her body slowly went limp. The vines around her began to wither and die as Persephone was slowly lowered down to the ground. She fell, landing on her knees, as she knelt in the burnt away garden. Thorn's body lay limply some distance away.

Persephone raised a hand to her face and felt the burns there.

"No..." she whispered. "How... can I go onstage like this?"

Annie

Annie raised the gun and fired. The man who had been charging at her with a sickle was blasted back. Oakley growled, pointing his nose forward. Without even looking Annie followed his point and fired: the dog had seen someone just out of sight. The bullet hit the corner, swerved, and then killed the man behind cover.

"Too easy." Annie said. "If only finding a man who can outshoot me was this easy."

"Milady..." Oakley said. "They come."

A demon stepped towards them now, thumping its large, muscular arms on the stone floor. It was, perhaps, a mix of Ignis and Gorilla. It pounded the ground and charged towards them. Annie smirked, raised the gun and-

"Milady!"

The floor burst beneath them. Annie shot the monster in mid-air as it tumbled below them. She and Oakley swerved over the vast pit. It had been a ruse: The monster had been trying to tumble them into the pit.

"Idiot didn't know we can fly." Annie said, smirking. Oakley nodded, his gaze turning back and forth.

The demon landed into the pool of lava at the bottom of the abyss and lay there. As it was a demon, it was completely unaffected by the elements and simply lay there, chilling. Annie watched it for a while, frowning. And then something leapt out of the lava and lunged for it, swallowing it instantly.

"Sweet crackers with honey what was that?" Annie said, alarmed, as the thing's eyes blinked up at them.

"One of the three beasts of Ignis!" Oakley moaned. "Ignis Francesca! She was born to a fish!"

The Witch stared up at her through lava coated eyes.

"Wish a rod and reel wouldn't burn up in the lava." Annie said. "I'd fish her out and serve her with some fries."

Francesca looked at them. Falls of lava began to fall from the walls surrounding her, and suddenly she began to rise upward towards them.

"Milady, I think she would rather eat us." Oakley said, alarmed.

"She's just a stupid fish." Annie said. "Wha-"

Francesca opened her mouth and a blast of lava shot out from it. Annie and Oakley swerved to the side, dodging it. They could feel the heat emanating off of the substance.

"She is also a demon, milady. You would be wise to not underestimate her."

Annie grimaced and raised the rifle.

"This will be like shooting fish in a barrel." She said. "We just have to-"

The thing shot out another blast of lava, and they swerved. This time a number of smaller fish- ones that seemed to have been dwelling in her mouth, shot out from the lava towards them.

"Yow!"

Annie got one on her fist and it made her drop the gun. Its large, piranha like teeth dug into her flesh and she desperately tried to shake it off. Oakley was not so lucky. He became covered in them. They bit and tore at his flesh and he howled, as he fell-

"No!"

Francesca leapt up, and with her jaws opened wide she snapped Oakley out of the air and swallowed him completely. Annie instantly felt her bond with him sever. He was dead.

"Raaaaaah!"

Annie threw herself downward and thrust her rifle into the thing's eye. It blinked up at her as it slowly began to fall back down to the

lava below. She blasted the eye apart, and the thing recoiled. She leapt back off as the thing fell back into the lava.

Losing a familiar was an extremely emotional thing: Annie rather felt like she had just lost her eyes and ears. She blindly stumbled around in mid-air as Francesca stared up at her... the lava still slowly rising.

Annie took a deep breath, and tried to relax. She watched the lava flow with interest, and then back to the fish.

She raised both of her arms wide, and opened the portal to the world where all of her weapons were stored. Guns, grenades, ammunitions, and bombs fell from where she stood in mid-air and fell into the lava.

BOOM!

Francesca reeled. Some of the material she had just deposited was explosive... but there was so much of it, she couldn't figure out which it was. She ducked her head underwater as more and more explosions rocked the lava well. Annie lowered herself, dropping more and more of her things as she came closer and closer to the lava-

The fish lunged upward, mouth agape, and Annie focused all of her efforts to deposit all of her explosives straight into her mouth.

Francesca exploded. Her blood and guts covered the stone walls of the well. Annie stood in place, surrounded by the remains of her enemy, threw her head back and cried like a baby.

Madelyn

Madelyn spun. The air around her became like that of a tornado as she shot forward like a missile. Her enemies had no idea what had hit them.

“Aggggggh!”

They went flying each way: Slamming into the walls, the ceiling, and down the hallway with a sickening splat. Madelyn slowed to a crawl as she faced down the leader, an Ignis Witch she recognized as a woman named Ignis Rena.

“You think you can stop me with your little attacks, Windsor?” She asked. She gestured to her feet. She had melted the stone around where she was standing to fix herself in place.

Madelyn gave her a look. She brought her hands to her side, and then thrust them forward. An intense blast of wind erupted from where she was standing. The woman smiled, as she adjusted her stance to take the blast. The smile turned into a grimace, which stayed on her face as her skin was ripped straight from her body and flapped uselessly behind her skeleton, which was still fixed firmly in place.

“You would do well not to underestimate me.” Madelyn said. Her voice was carried throughout the entire castle by way of the wind. “I will tear this entire castle to the ground if I must.”

“Hahaha.”

Madelyn glanced at the wall. The bricks were beginning to move to the side, forming a small passageway.

“I am Ignis Yvette.” The voice said. “Come to me, and face a true challenge.”

Madelyn brushed her hair with her fingers, considering. Yvette was one of the nine... If she could take her out now, that was one less threat the Freeman would have to eliminate later.

"Very well." She said. She slid into the passageway and it closed behind her, leaving her in complete darkness.

She stood there for a moment, her senses preened for any kind of movement. A flame erupted into the middle of the void. No light emanated from it: The room remained in complete darkness.

"I am the Eldest Daughter of Ignis... Yvette."

"Knowing your kind you probably killed all of your older sisters." Madelyn said snidely. The flames chuckled.

"You seem to know our ways very well, Madelyn." She said. "Perhaps you could become one of us... the Master has expressed that he desires you."

"I'm a married woman." Madelyn said. "And with my own master to serve." Her eyes narrowed. "Is that why you brought me here? To proposition me?"

"I thought I would at least give you the opportunity to hand yourself willingly." The flame said. "But if not..."

The flame vanished. There was no source of light in the room at all. Madelyn closed her eyes and took a fighting stance.

She felt something lunging at her and she struck out at her, her long powerful leg lunging out in a sweeping kick. The thing, whatever it was, burst into flame upon contact. Madelyn's aura was powerful enough to prevent her bare leg from being burned, but she could sense another being coming at her from behind.

She spun around, creating a great whirlwind to go along with it, and the thing was blown away into the darkness. She came to a stop and considered: She wasn't hitting Yvette herself, merely her attacks. Where was she?

She honed her senses further and became further convinced: Yvette was not in the room with her.

She stepped forward on the point of her toes, trying to get a feel for the layout of the room. By manipulating the air currents around her,

she was able to get a feel for the position of the walls around her. The walls seemed to be... pulsing.

Another blast shot out towards her. She whirled around again, but instead of kicking it into pieces she grabbed it with her hands. She cupped the flame in her hands, containing it with her own magical properties, and purified it.

The flame exposed the room around her and she let out an exasperated groan.

She was in the stomach of a great beast. The stone she was standing on was merely a tiny bit of the castle wall that the beast appeared to have swallowed. On every angle pulsating flesh oozed out evil flame, spitting out every way.

"Oh so you figured it out." Yvette giggled. "You were dead the moment you stepped into my maw."

So she was inside Yvette. She must have been massive... Madelyn had never known a witch to achieve a form this big. Going by the size of its inside, she very well may have been considered a kaiju.

One of the many uvulas lining either side of the stomach turned towards her and shot another flame at her. She deflected it again.

"This is how my digestive system works." Yvette explained, as Madelyn grit her teeth. "I burn my prey to a crisp and then digest it... it isn't unusual for the things I eat live to stay down there for weeks and weeks... desperately hoping for a way to escape."

Madelyn grimaced. She bent her head down and stared at the deep cavern before her. Further in she was sure that she would face a number of horrors beyond her comprehension.

"You leave me no choice." Madelyn said quietly. Her hair began to bristle. "Did you think I would be so easily beaten?"

She bared her teeth and her teeth began to widen. Her legs became even longer, and began to twist around each other until they became one. Her waist lengthened, and the bones in her body began to compress.

Two great wings sprouted out of her back, and then folded on either side of her head forward.

Sky Serpent Windsor Madelyn!

She shot herself into the thing's stomach. Yvette chuckled.

"Are you really in such a hurry to die?" She asked idly.

The bladed wings folded across Madelyn's head tore straight through the thing's flesh. Yvette let out a screech of pain, her mouth opening wide open, as Madelyn dug deep into her flesh. Her senses were going wild, screaming at her to stop... but she pushed on ahead.

She pushed through stomach acids and the demonic equivalent of white cells, trying to stop her but she did not yield. She found a vein of blood, dug into it, and then shielded her eyes with her wings as she soared upward through the blood and into the heart.

"Blaaaaaaagh!"

The heart exploded, killing her enemy instantly. Madelyn shot out of the body, demon blood falling all around her, as she took in a deep gasp of air.

"THE FIRST OF THE NINE HAS BEEN DESTROYED!" She cried, her voice reverberating throughout the entire castle. "THE WINDSOR CLAIM ITS FIRST VICTORY!"

The body of Ignis Yvette slumped behind her as the Sky Serpent Madelyn, still seeping blood, descended back into the battle, longing for her next prey.

Ichiro

"The first?" Poppy asked timidly. "We've been here an hour!" She looked somewhat nauseous at the thought.

"These guys aren't easy Poppy." Ichiro said shortly, as he examined his Kambuto. He had replaced the baseball bat he had broken during the school with a traditional samurai weapon that he had named 'Yamato.' His bright blue Oni mask was fixed squarely on his face.

"I know that." Poppy said defensively. "It's just... Madelyn's one of the strongest we have."

"What, you scared?"

"Yes." Poppy said. "You'd be insane not to be."

Ichiro glanced at her. "But you're still here fighting anyway."

"Of course I am." She said. "I have to be."

They glanced down the hall. A great beast was standing there. It was a minotaur holding a snake like demon in its grip. It snapped it like a whip towards them, and the snake hissed audibly with each snap.

"Poor thing." Poppy said sympathetically. "You almost feel sorry for it."

"It's a demon." Ichiro said shortly. "It needs to be killed like all the rest."

He stepped forward, brandishing the kanabo in front of him.

"Come here, you!"

The minotaur raised the snake whip again and shot it towards him. Ichiro took the spiked bat and quickly stabbed the beast's head. The snake writhed about in pain as Ichiro twisted his grip, wrapping the snake around his weapon, and then pulled.

The minotaur was perhaps ten feet tall and over a thousand pounds, and yet it slid across the floor towards Ichiro. It braced its hooves against the ground and pulled back.

The snake let out a pained noise as it ripped in half. The minotaur staggered backward, his half of the snake shooting past up over his head. Ichiro quickly regained his own footing, and he charged forward, his bat preparing to swing.

The minotaur straightened itself just as Ichiro leapt up to its head.

CRASH

The bat slammed straight into the minotaurs head and it caved in. The thing stumbled about, trying in vain to get ahold of its target,

before finally falling to the ground with a sickening crash.

Poppy's mouth was wide open.

"That was Bova, the Bull of Ignis." She whispered. "He was supposed to be really strong."

Ichiro raised the bat to his shoulder.

"I was stronger." He said shortly. "I think I'm ready to take on a High Witch"

Poppy bit her lip.

"We shouldn't rush into it." She said. "We need to thin out their ranks and team up with the others to-"

Ichiro broke out into a sprint down the hall. Poppy took off after him, her cloak billowing behind her.

A lot of the people they encountered on the way were Ignis cultists and cattle who had come to defend the castle with no real idea what they were getting into. Ichiro leapt into the mob, sending five or six of them flying with a single swing of his kanabo, as the bullets shot at him at point blank range simply bounced off of his skin.

Poppy floated above him, watching the fight to see if she was needed, but Ichiro's power was so overwhelming that she would just get in the way. Instead she took the opportunity to scan the area ahead.

"Something's coming!" She said to Ichiro, as he crushed the head of the last enemy in his path.

Ichiro turned. Something was thundering down the hallway towards him.

It was another demon: This one was about the size and shape of a bull, with steam protruding from both nostrils and fire spitting from his mouth. It bent its head and charged at them.

Ichiro took a batting stance and gripped the Kambuto as the demon approached. He swung wildly, catching the beast in the side of the

head. He hit it so hard that it went flying to the side, slamming through the stone wall.

Poppy glanced upward, and could see the beast had kept slamming through walls until she could see outside.

"Insane..." She whispered. She turned back to Ichiro, who was already breaking out into another sprint.

"Don't leave me alone!" She cried, as she flew after him.

Someone jumped out in front of them.

"I am Ignis Kendall! I am the apprentice of Ignis Kiara, one of the nine! Face me and-"

Ichiro did not slow down as he swung the Kambuto and took her head clean off in one shot. The head flew through the air and slammed into the castle wall, where it exploded.

Ichiro hadn't stopped sprinting. He was still running forward as the new voice hit them both:

"Raaaah!"

Ichiro stopped. A figure in bright red armor stepped out to meet them. He brandished Yamato in front of him as he glared at this new arrival.

"A man of Japan!" The thing boomed through its helmet. It whirled a naginata with a single hand and pointed it at him. "Have at you!"

Poppy floated behind him, her mind elsewhere. She was so confident in Ichiro's ability to overcome any opponent that she was already thinking about their next move. Ichiro bent his head and charged forward.

The armored figure swerved the naginata in front of its face, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. Ichiro stopped in his tracks as the fire became great bird like creatures and shot towards him. One hit his shoulder, blowing the skin off. The other's hit his thigh, his waist, and his leg. He staggered, barely managing to block the one heading straight for his face with Yamato.

"Ugh!"

"Ichiro!"

She shot down to help him, her hands already glowing with a green energy.

"Stay back! This is a duel!"

Poppy flinched, shirking back as Ichiro staggered back to his feet. He glared at his enemy.

"You're one of them, aren't you?" He rasped.

The figure considered him. It raised its hand and lowered its helmet.

"I am Ignis Kamura." She said. "The greatest swordsman among the Ignis."

Ichiro smiled grimly.

"I've heard of you." He rasped. "You were a lady samurai."

A shadow fell across her face.

"Yes." She said softly. "And you have grown so strong, Ichiro... you do our ancestors proud."

Ichiro gripped Yamato in his hands and stared up at her as she stared down at him impassively.

"I do have to kill you." She said. "It is unfortunate. You are everything I hoped you would be, and more. I am old, child... I have seen empires fall. Nations, religion, culture... all of it will someday turn to ash."

Ichiro brandished his weapon. Poppy held her hands out wide, preparing to defend him. Kamura looked at them both.

She slammed the handle of her naginata against the ground.

"I see that the two of you will not be deterred." She said. "Enough talk! Stand proud and fight!"

Poppy leapt upwards as she swung the naginata. She blasted bursts of her wind blades at her head. Kamura knocked them aside with

her free hand. Ichiro leapt forward, gritting his teeth, and swung the kanabo

It clashed with Kamura's naginata, and they glared down at each other. Kamura easily holding him back with a single hand. Poppy swerved around her head, firing off another magical blast.

Kamura threw Ichiro back and raised the naginata around, blocking that strike as well. Ichiro and Poppy stood at a distance, eyes wide.

"Are we getting our asses kicked?"

"Uh, I think so." Poppy stammered. "Uh, try hitting her harder next time."

Ichiro grimaced under his mask.

"I'll try that, thanks." He said darkly.

Kamura stood there silently, watching him closely.

"You, Ichiro." She said. "You have natural talent. But you only just now begun to refine it into true power through discipline and training. You are a hundred years too early to defeat me."

Poppy lunged forward. Kamura looked up at her, and she swerved to the side.

"You... are also talented." Kamura murmured. "But you have not yet learned to let go of your humanity. You still fear death."

Poppy shot out an intense blast of wind at her. Kamura stood there steadfast and did not budge an inch.

"The armor is too tough for me!" Poppy called down to Ichiro. "You have to destroy her armor!"

Ichiro took a step forward.

"It cannot be done." Kamura said heavily. "Not by you."

Poppy shot in front of her face and swiped with her hand. The air around her hand condensed into a blade as she tried to jab at her eye. Kamura shot her hand forward and grabbed her by the neck. She choked, as Kamura squeezed.

“Raaaaaaaaah!”

Ichiro charged. He swung the Kambuto with all of his might at the armored figure. Kamura stood there as Yamato connected with the side of her armor.

DOING

Yamato shot backwards away from her, and Ichiro had to steady it. The Naginata shot straight towards his face, and Ichiro cried out as it struck him on the side of the face.

Poppy moaned pitifully, kicking Kamura hopelessly, as Ichiro regained his balance and struck her again.

I have to break it.

DOING

He shot backward again. The naginata again lunged towards his face, but this time he avoided it.

I have to be stronger.

DOING

The third time the naginata came for him he took the blade through the shoulder. He cried as he fell to his knees mid swing, losing all of the force behind the motion. Poppy was turning blue as he fell.

“You fought like a true samurai.” Kamura said, as she ripped the naginata out of him. He let out a pained noise as she brought it down again.

“Ugh!”

Poppy kicked her leg back, and an intense blast of wind hit Ichiro. He slid backward, out of range from her attack. Kamura glanced upward at Poppy.

“You’re certainly very brave.” Kamura said, as her grip tightened her neck. “But very stupid.”

Ichiro staggered to his feet. He tried to ignore the pain in his body as he took a step forward.

Kamura adjusted the naginata and pointed it at him. One of the fire red birds shot towards him. He grimaced and blocked it with Yamato. It exploded upon contact, blinding him.

Poppy went limp, hanging uselessly in mid-air. Ichiro barely noticed. He continued forward, as quickly as he was able with his overwhelming injuries.

"Stupid." Kamura breathed to him, in Japanese, as she brought the Naginata down again. The blade slashed fire through the air, and it shot towards him. Blinded as he was, Ichiro couldn't block it. It burned into his skin, blackening it. He grimaced again, and pressed forward.

WOOOOOOOOOOSH

Something swept in from behind him. Ichiro kept walking forward as Sky Serpent Madelyn swooped in from behind her, snarling.

"Release her!"

The serpent twisted, avoiding the naginata's shots of flame. Kamura took a step back as Madelyn spun around, smashing her tail against her face like a whip. She reeled slightly, and Madelyn wrapped her long serpentine body around her waist, neck, and the arm that held Poppy. The wings on her back shot outward, cutting up Kamura's face as Madelyn placed her fangs onto the gloved hand and tried to pry it loose.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Ichiro charged forward and with a mighty swing clobbered Kamura's side once again. The blow once again bounced off. Madelyn's voice reached him, carried by the wind as she grappled with Kamura's hand:

"Idiot! That isn't going to work!"

Kamura raised the naginata upward and tried to jab at Madelyn. She swerved out of the way, moving like the wind itself.

"Poppy's going to die if you don't help me! Focus on the naginata!"

Ichiro stared at the weapon. He brandished Yamato, and then brought it back down. The naginata shot upwards again, towards Madelyn, but this time he snapped the handle off.

Madelyn whirled around, grabbing the blade of the naginata in her teeth, threw it at Kamura. The Ignis Witch had no choice but to block it with her free hand. Madelyn wrapped herself around the arm, restraining it, and then bit down on her neck.

"Let her go." Madelyn breathed.

Poppy fell to the ground at her feet. She coughed, rolling around, and tried to crawl away.

"I suppose I am fortunate that the Windsor is not venomous." Kamura said quietly. She grabbed hold of Madelyn's body and squeezed.

Madelyn let out a gasp, as her two powerful hands began to rip her away from her body. She tried to tighten her grip on Kamura's neck, but to no avail. Kamura's power was simply too great.

"Hooooooooold STILL!"

Ichiro leapt up into the air, and brought Yamato down onto Kamura's head. She glanced up at it, narrowed her eyes, and then head butted it.

The spike that connected to her head shattered as Ichiro spun off balance and crashed into the ground.

Madelyn writhed and fought as Kamura ripped it off of her. She snapped and bit, her wings uselessly scaping against Kamura's armor as Kamura slowly removed her from her.

In the end Madelyn had to give up. She converted her body to pure wind and escaped her grasp, shooting towards Poppy and Ichiro.

"Grab on!"

Ichiro didn't move. Madelyn had to stop and grab her with her teeth as Kamura shot a fire blast after them. As fast as it was, Madelyn was faster. She easily evaded all of the shots.

"Idiots, both of you." She hissed. "We all could have been killed."

Kamura placed the helmet back on her head.

"You will be." She said tonelessly, as Madelyn fled the battlefield.

"Simply give it time."

She advanced.

Jillian

Jillian grimaced. Jameson's trunk swerved around left her right, staying on the offensive from those who would intrude upon them. Her purpose in the operation was to use her powers to counter Ignis Arrakeen's. The cryogenic chamber served as a sort of shield for her, and fueled her powers far beyond their usual capacity. But even so, it was all so she could do to maintain a reasonable temperature.

"Should we advance?" The Elephant asked.

Jillian considered. They were on the very back line of the offensive... the very first room in the castle. She had established a little fortress made of ice here. She had killed any and all who had intruded upon this place. The powers granted to be by freezing herself in the cryostasis machine, coupled with the protection of the Colonel, had led to this part of the castle quickly becoming secure.

"No." Jillian said. "It is not our place. In many way this is not our fight... I simply want to protect my people. Nothing more."

"Steady on." Jameson told her from under her. Jillian glanced down at his trunk, and nodded. Regardless of her reasons for being here, she was risking her life, the same as everyone else.

She tried to put her mind back on the battle. Jameson tapped the glass on her chamber once, and then lowered his trunk back below.

Before he could answer, the ceiling trembled. Jillian glanced up to see large cracks forming in the ice that cut off the ceiling from the rest of the room.

"Careful." Jameson said quietly. "The enemy approaches."

Jillian reinforced the ice with more ice. But she was at a disadvantage. Even while she was doing it, she could feel the creature on the other hand burning its way into the room. The ice all around her was melting... Jillian knew what was coming.

The ice gave way. A figure descended into the room with her. She was darker skinned and very beautiful. Jillian recognized her immediately.

"I thought that was you." Arrakeen said. Jillian felt her breath hitch in her throat. She could feel the temperature in the room jump ten degrees, in spite of her best attempts at mitigating it. Jameson glared at her.

"You must be Arrakeen." He said. "I have heard a lot about you."

"Oh, it talks." Arrakeen said, giving him a glance. "Are you her familiar?"

"I am Colonel Jameson of the Indianapolis-"

"Ah yes, I have heard of you." Arrakeen interrupted him. "I take it that you have come here to protect the zoo from us..."

The Colonel raised his trunk towards her and stomped his foot. The whole room shook. Arrakeen did not seem particularly intimidated.

She raised her finger and pointed it at Jillian.

"You, Elsin, will see your people destroyed."

Ice spikes shot out of the ground towards her. Arrakeen stood there as in a matter of seconds the ice melted and then evaporated into nothing.

"I've trained myself to radiate temperatures higher than even the harshest of deserts." She said. "Water cannot even touch me."

A pulse of heat emanated from her. Jameson let out a pained noise as his ears began to flap incessantly, desperately trying to cool himself off. Jillian wrapped a sheet of thin ice around his body to keep him cool, but almost immediately it began to melt.

"The only reason you can even survive in this environment is because of that thing." Arrakeen said, eyeing the cryogenic device thoughtfully. "I wonder... how high of a temperature can it withstand?"

Jillian flinched.

"Calm yourself Jillian." Jameson barked at her. "You mustn't lose focus."

Another pulse of heat emanated from Arrakeen. Jameson let out a gasp, and shuddered. Jillian surrounded both of them with a massive sphere of ice.

"Temperature... UP."

The blast of heat hit the barrier. Although the brunt of it did not impact them at all, they still felt uncomfortable warm.

"Temperature... UP."

Another blast hit them. The ice began to thin. Jillian quickly reinforced it.

"Jillian."

"Yes?"

"We have to try to fight her." He said. "We can't continue playing defense like this."

Jillian grimaced, and nodded.

"I have an idea." She said softly. "Your trunk..."

He raised it up towards her, facing her. An entire slab of ice appeared, surrounding it completely. A blast of heat hit them, and it began to melt. Jameson began taking in the water into his body.

"I see." Jameson said. "Very well."

Jillian grimaced, and allowed the fourth barrier to destroy the ice completely. Jameson charged, swinging his trunk wildly in front of him.

"Temperature UP."

Jameson staggered. He raised his trunk high and pressed it up against Arrakeen's chest. She smiled at him.

The ice burst out of his trunk in a great sword. Arrakeen screamed as the ice spike penetrated her entire body, destroying every one of her critical areas. She hung there limply in mid-air as Jillian let out a gasp of relief, as the temperature in the room quickly began to drop.

"Careful." Jameson warned her. "You may freeze me to death."

"Oh... I'm sorry." Jillian apologized. She had to consciously dial back her natural urge to cool her environment and allowed the room to cool naturally.

Jameson tossed the body of Arrakeen to the side, and it slid against the wall and to the floor.

"That's two." Jameson said disparagingly. "Seven more remaining."

"Our people won't have to worry about staying cool anymore." Jillian said. "Hopefully this turns things around in our favor." She hesitated. "Jameson?"

"Yes?"

"I'm glad you didn't die."

He smiled ruefully.

"Me too." He said.

Soleil

They had been fighting since the battle had begun. Soleil found herself matched up against the perfect Ignis Witch, a master of the Ignis Fire Fist, and one of the strongest women among the Ignis.

"Why won't you die!" The woman in question cried in frustration as she spun wildly around for her next attack.

Soleil dodged, a stony expression on her face, as a flurry of Sinistra's punches and kicks came at her.

Soleil kept her eyes on her, carefully watching where the flames from her propulsion points were coming from. Doing so allowed her to predict where each blow would be coming from.

"Are you reading my mind?" Sinistra demanded, as Soleil counter-punched and caught her across the face.

"No." Soleil said, truthfully. "You're just not as strong as they say."

Sinistra staggered backward, her eyes rolling to the back of her head. Finally Soleil sensed an opening. She drew a katana from her pouch and slashed forward. Sinistra let out a cry as she stumbled backward, clutching at her neck. Soleil had cut straight through it.

Soleil lowered the blade and watched her as she struggled. Her skin and muscle reformed, reattaching her head to the rest of her body.

"Surviving a decapitation takes some skill." Soleil noted, as Sinistra's head settled itself back into place. "But I think it is clear that you are no match for me."

Sinistra tilted her head to the right, and then to the left, making sure that it had been reattached correctly.

"What are you talking about?" Sinistra asked. "I'm going to fuck you up, and then make love to your husband."

"I am not going to die here."

"Oh I'm not going to kill you." Sinistra said brightly. "I'm going to make you watch."

Soleil did not react. She simply stood there, at the ready. Sinistra's smile faded. In spite of her best efforts, she could not goad Soleil into making a mistake. Every one of her enemy's actions was smooth and calculated. She had flawlessly countered all of her best attacks while the battle continued around them. She had not yet been able to kill her... but surviving was all Sinistra had been able to do.

Soleil readied the sword and pointed it at her. Her eyes were fixed on her and focused. A bead of sweat ran down Sinistra's face. Nothing she had tried had worked.

"Sinistra!"

A sliver of relief passed through Sinistra. She turned her back to Soleil, smiling widely.

"Kamura!"

Soleil leapt at her. Sinistra stood there, smiling widely, as Kamura leapt forward and with one move countered Soleil's sword strike with her own. Sinistra standing right in the middle.

"Never turn your back on the enemy." Kamura told her coldly. She twisted her wrist and sent Soleil tumbling backwards. She staggered, readying her weapon, and glared at the armored figure.

"I take it that you are one of the Nine." Soleil said. She knew instantly that this was a warrior to be feared. Her own overwhelming strength made it difficult for all but the most powerful of opponents to overpower her.

Kamura pushed past Sinistra and faced Soleil.

"I am Ignis Kamura." She said, through her helmet.

"The Lady Samurai." Soleil recalled. "The strongest among the Ignis." She found herself feeling a new thrill of excitement. "It's an honor to meet you."

"Leave us, Sinistra." Kamura commanded. "This is a duel: You are needed elsewhere."

"But I-"

"Go!"

Sinistra looked reproachfully between them.

"We will settle this, Soleil!" She said. And then she was gone.

They faced each other in the silence.

"I have been following your exploits." Kamura said quietly. "Out of all of the Freeman, you have impressed me the most."

"Thank you." Soleil said quietly. "But I daresay there are those among us that are my better."

"In battle?" Kamura inquired. "I think not."

"There are more important things than being strong." Soleil said.

"Only the strength of your sword matters." Kamura said.

She raised her sword as well and the two faced each other.

"I pity you." Soleil said quietly.

They charged towards each other. They clashed again, but this time Soleil's sword shattered on impact. Her eyes widened as she backed away, Kamura unleashing blasts of fire bats at her. She leapt into the air to dodge the first, twisted to dodge the second, fell flat on the ground to dodge the third, and had to roll along the ground, drawing another sword as Kamura brought the blade down.

"Ha!"

She swung the sword around and clashed with Kamura's again. They met once more, and this time they held. They struggled for a brief few seconds- Soleil again found herself impressed by her strength- until Soleil's sword shattered.

Again Soleil found herself stepping back, but this time she drew another weapon, a large sturdy club, and used it to block her strike.

"That will not work." Kamura said quietly, when they clashed again.

"This blade is Japanese steel. Your weapons are like butter."

To emphasize her point, she adjusted the blade, and without even exerting much more force into it cut right through her weapon. Soleil glowered.

"You are an amazing swordsman." Kamura told her, as Soleil again took a step back. "But I can see that the quality of your weapons are holding you back. Here."

She took the katana and tossed it up on the air. Soleil watched as it spun, and then landed in the stone at her feet, its hilt pointed right towards her, ready for the taking.

"You would grant me a weapon?" Soleil asked quietly. Rage began to well up within her. "You think so lowly of my ability?"

"I'm curious what you could do with a real weapon." Kamura said.

"Please. Indulge me."

Soleil took the katana in her grip and pulled it out of the stone. It was as her enemy had said: The shining blade in her hand

surpassed anything she had ever used. She brandished it in front of her and stared down at her opponent.

Kamura smiled as Soleil charged.

The blade slashed straight through Kamura's armor, cutting it to ribbons. Soleil brought the blade back up to hack the armor away, but she stopped mid motion.

The armor was already reforging itself.

"My armor too is of Japanese steel." Kamura said quietly. "And... what is more... I have learned to heat and mold it to my desires." The armor reforged itself into a flawless steel. Soleil stared at it, her expression tightened.

"You grasp the severity of your situation." Kamura said. "My armor cannot be cut by ordinary means. And if it is... I can mend it. And what's more..."

She smashed her fist against her armor plating.

"Even without this armor, I am your better." She said. "You cannot beat me."

Soleil took a step forward.

"But I will still fight."

She darted forward. Kamura held out her hand, and a vast Warhammer appeared in her hand as she swung it down at Soleil. Soleil darted around her, her gaze hardened. She landed on top of the hammer and swung the blade right at her helmet.

Kamura lifted the hammer back up and she was thrown upward, the slash narrowly missing her head, as Soleil twirled in mid-air. Kamura leapt upward with shocking speed and slammed the hammer at her. Soleil took the blow and crashed through the wall.

She lay, dazed, as Kamura landed in front of her and advanced.

"It's a shame." Kamura said. "A warrior such as yourself is only born once a generation."

She raised the hammer.

Isobel

"That's the last of them."

The girls from the Women's shelter had piled the last of the bodies on top of a great pyre. Many of them had recognized names and faces that had defiled them or their loved ones over the years. So no tears were shed when Isobel stepped forward and lit the pyre on fire.

"The Cattle have been dealt with." Catherine said from behind her.

"But what next?"

"We wait." Isobel said quietly. "For Soleil and the others to come through..."

Minerva landed on top of the railway next to them.

"Hey you." She said brightly. "I have news from Jillian!"

The girls all crowded around her.

"Two of the Nine have fallen!" She said. "Ignis Yvette fell at the hands of Windsor Madelyn... and Ignis Arrakeen fell at the hands of Elsin Jillian and the Colonel."

Nora the elephant wagged her ears enthusiastically.

"My father destroyed one of the nine?" She seemed positively delighted.

"Currently we're still trying to locate the others." Minerva went on.

"And... unfortunately... Soleil Freeman is losing her battle against Ignis Kamura."

There was a heavy silence around the circle.

"What?" Isobel asked. "But Soleil is-"

"Losing, yes." Minerva said, sounding somewhat bored. "Kamura is more than a match for her, I'm afraid."

"Wha- what about the others?" Nora asked hesitantly. "My father, could he come to her-"

"The Colonel's role is to protect Jillian." Minerva said shortly. "It was Soleil's decision to take point."

Isobel clenched her hand into a fist. She stared straight ahead, her mind whirling.

Soleil...

"Isobel?"

Catherine was looking at her.

"Are you... okay?"

Isobel breathed out. Black smoke protruded from her nostrils. And then she began to step away from the group.

Catherine stared at her, completely taken aback as Isobel broke out into a sprint.

"Isobel... wait! Where are you going!"

Isobel did not turn around. Her gaze was fixed squarely in the distance, where she knew the Castle lay waiting.

Soleil

I don't care what it takes

I will not

Allow you

To die...

She coughed. Black liquid shot out of her mouth and into the grass at her feet.

"Master..." She prayed. "You granted me one wish. You would provide me with the one thing that I desired most. I know now what I want, more than anything. I will protect her! I will give up everything so that she can live! I beg you... Power! Give me Power!"

Jillian

"Raaaah!"

Jillian looked up. The ice on the ceiling shattered as someone came barreling through at her.

"Die!" Sinistra screamed, as she kicked at her cryogenic chamber.

Jillian had no time to react: Her carefully placed bindings snapped as her chamber tilted over, and began to fall.

"Leave me!" She snapped to Jameson, as he turned to help her. "We are in battle!"

She fell to the ground with a slam. A large crack formed on the side of her chamber. She couldn't see what was happening from this angle.

She could Jameson let out a trumpet and the stomp of his feet, and then a loud voice crying out. "No you don't!"

There was a struggle. And then Jameson collapsed.

Jillian grimaced as the figure advanced on her chamber.

"I'm not a fan of the cold." Sinistra said. She raised a leg and kicked at the glass. The cracks deepened. Jillian lay there, her eyes on Jameson's body.

"Is he dead?" She asked cautiously.

"Of course." Sinistra said.

"Then I don't have to hold back."

The temperature around them dropped sharply to sub zero. Intense blasts of ice shot towards Sinestra, intent on penetrating her. She stood there, looking bored, as the ice surrounding her began to melt.

"Did you really think you could beat an Ignis Witch like this?" She asks contemptuously.

It had worked on Arrakeen. Jillian thought wryly. Not for the first time, she marveled at how lucky she had actually been to get the better of her. The heat emanating from an Ignis Witch made her ice based attacks unviable.

Sinistra kicked out at the chamber again, and the glass shattered. Jillian let out a gasp, unable to handle the raw heat emanating from her enemy, as Sinistra dragged her out and held her aloft.

"I don't think hell will be to your liking."

Jillian let out a scream as her entire body caught flame. She writhed and kicked out at Sinistra, trying to break herself free. Sinistra grimaced as Jillian's foot connected squarely with her waist, but each successive kick became weaker and weaker until... she was still.

"Stop!"

Sinistra turned, her grip still firmly around Jillian's neck, as a blonde girl stepped up to her, rifle in hand.

Sinistra tossed the body to the side and stepped forward.

"And you are...?"

The girl raised and pointed the rifle at her.

"Isobel Carnell." She said breathlessly. She swayed back and forth, and then steadied herself. "I've... come to save Soleil."

"Soleil Freeman?" Sinistra asked contemptuously. "She's surely dead by now... Ignis Kamura is the strongest out of all of us."

Isobel's eyes darkened. The whites of her eyes were shifting into a hideous black.

"You look angry." Sinistra said quietly, as she took a step forward towards her. "Is it something I said?"

Isobel fired the rifle. Sinistra, with a bored expression on her face, raised her index finger and thumb and caught the bullet in mid-air.

"Soleil sucks." She said, as she flicked the bullet back at her. The bullet slammed into Isobel's head, sending her head jerking backwards. Black blood began spilling out of her head in waves. It washed over her completely, covering her entire form, and began to harden into a crystal.

Sinistra had already turned away from her, her attention set on finding another target. The bodies of her enemies lying behind her,

she set off down the hall.

Eilonwy

"Jillian is dead." Eilonwy said tonelessly. "Jameson too."

American grit his teeth.

The two of them had taken the car as far into the Castle as they were able. The car heavily armored and decked out in a number of firearms, was actually very effective in mowing down wave after wave of cultists. The castle, they had realized, was divided into a variety of sections, each controlled by one of the Nine.

"We mustn't lose heart now." Eilonwy said. "Not until all of our enemies are destroyed."

She paused. She turned sharply to look at American. "We must no longer waste time on this fodder." She said. "We must find and destroy the Nine. If anyone of them survive this assault, Ignis will be summoned."

"Eilonwy--"

"Hush."

She turned her head upward.

"Kiara..." She whispered. "I can hear her voice."

She opened the door of the car and stepped outside.

"I will fly to your side once I am finished with her." She said. "Please, keep yourself safe."

"And you as well." American said.

Eilonwy's lips turned upwards into a small smile, before she shot off into the air.

Eilonwy was much, much faster in flight than she was on the ground: she shot through the air like the wind itself, so quickly that she could not be seen by the enemy. She passed by several combat exchanges on her: Not only between the Freeman and the enemy, but the enemy with each other.

Even now they would fight amongst themselves for petty reasons. She thought with disdain.

She shot off again. Kiara's powers were musical in nature: the sound of her voice reverberated throughout the entire castle. It was not hard to track her down.

She came to a stop outside Kiara's large double doors and stared up at them.

She only had to rap once before the door opened. Eilonwy tightly wrapped her cloak around her as she stepped into the room.

"Welcome... to my chambers." A voice purred from all around her. "You are... Windsor Eilonwy, aren't you? You're far prettier than I thought you would be..."

"Thank you." Eilonwy said, curtsying slightly, a small smile on her lips. "But I'm not interested in Ignis."

"Yes... I'm well aware." Kiara purred. "Your tastes tend to lean a little bit younger, don't they?"

"I don't know what you mean." Eilonwy said easily.

"It was you who seduced American Freeman and set him against us." She said lazily. Eilonwy straightened herself. "None of the people who are here today would fight for you... so you used a child to unite them all under the American Flag."

The candles lined all over the room went out. The room was thrust into pure blackness.

When the candles relit themselves, they were in a completely different room. The pleasant, inviting looking bedchamber had turned into a bare room surrounded by nothing but stone walls in every direction.

The only other thing in the room was Ignis Kiara. She smiled seductively at her as she ran her hands through her long red hair.

"I meant what I said, you know." She said. "You really are pretty. You would make a wonderful gift to the Master... you still being a virgin and all."

The tips of her hair began to light on fire. Her legs seemed to vanish as the girl began to grow in size, towering over her.

"It's such a shame I have to kill you." Kiara said. The flames shot outward towards her. Eilonwy stood in place, her green cloak wrapped tightly around her.

She let out a noise that sounded rather like she was clearing her throat.

"La La Laaaaaaaaa!"

An intense burst of fire launched from her mouth. Eilonwy did not move as the blast hit her. It slammed into her full force, sending her cloak billowing backward.

"Using your voice to propel fireballs..." Eilonwy murmured. "I've seen that one before. It's an old trick."

"You haven't seen anything yet." Kiara said. "La la LAAAAAAAAA!"

This time the notes hit even higher. The force was intense. Still Eilonwy took the blast without moving an inch.

"Are you so frightened of me?" Kiara asked. "So frightened that you can't even move?"

Eilonwy smiled grimly. "The only thing hurting now is my eardrums." She said quietly. Her ears were ringing.

"Yes." Kiara said. "Eventually my notes will hit a level that the human mind cannot comprehend... and your head will explode."

"Creative." Eilonwy said dryly. "Or you could just hit me with more fire."

"Ha." Kiara said. "We both know a witch of your level is more than capable of dealing with basic attacks. No... I will continue pitching my voice higher until you cannot bear to hear me anymore."

"La la laaaaaaaaaa!"

Eilonwy's ears were ringing now. She stood tall, staring up at her enemy.

"You can't move?" Kiara asked. "How quaint. Perhaps if you surrender now... you can be a concubine to the master."

She stopped. She took in a deep breath.

"La La Laaaaaa-"

The flames that sputtered out of her mouth were far weaker than the last.

"What...?"

The flames that were shooting out of the bottom of her bathrobe were diminishing. She was falling to the floor, slowly, but surely. The flames were still sputtering as she hit the ground.

"Wha-"

She fell onto her knees and took in a great gasp of air.

"You don't know how your own powers work, do you?" Eilonwy asked quietly. Kiara grimaced, digging her long nails into the stone as she dragged herself across the floor towards her.

"Fire requires oxygen burn." Eilonwy explained quietly. "The moment you sealed me here, in this airtight space... I knew I had you right where I wanted you."

Kiara reached her. She held out her hand and grabbed her cloak. Eilonwy stared down at her coolly.

"I have been removing oxygen from the air since I arrived." She said. "With no oxygen, you cannot produce flame."

"N-no..."

Kiara clutched her cloak.

"Please... I don't want to die."

Eilonwy smiled. It was a cold smile, one that held no sympathy for her enemy.

"Neither did I." She said sweetly, as Kiara let out one last agonized gasp, and then slumped over.

Goneril

She raised her head high into the high and sniffed it.

"I smell something good."

"What?" Celia asked.

Goneril raised a finger and bopped it on her nose. "You."

Celia flushed, turning her gaze away from the vampire.

"Is she giving you a hard time, Celia?" Charlotte Harker asked, on the other end of their two way radio. "Am I going to have to discipline her?"

"That won't be necessary." Goneril said quickly, backing away from her. "I'm behaving myself... honest."

Charlotte smiled to herself and leaned back in her chair. As a non combatant she had taken it upon herself to take on the role of the intelligence officer of the operation.

"If you were behaving yourself you wouldn't be preying on my darling Celia."

"I wasn't going to prey on her!" Goneril said indignantly. "I was being serious! I can... smell someone just like her!"

There was a heavy silence.

"Cordelia." Celia breathed.

"It must be." Charlotte said softly. "You have no other family in this place."

Goneril leaned in close to Celia's neck and took in a deep sniff. Celia flinched, almost instinctively pulling away. Goneril seemed to take a lot longer than was necessary.

"Mmmm... this way."

She took Celia by the hand and dragged her down the hall.

"We should meet up with the others." Celia said quietly, as they walked. "If we meet one of the nine with our numbers, we'd be crushed."

"Oh don't worry about it." Goneril said lightly. "I mean... you getting crushed means I get to see blood, right?"

Celia let out a groan. Charlotte laughed over the radio.

"Oh yes." Charlotte said. "I've just gotten word that the fourth member of the Nine has been defeated... Ignis Kiara. Eilonwy did it."

"Not a single member of the Order of the Dragon has had a kill so far!" Goneril chirped. Celia stared at her.

"Neither have you."

"I am unconcerned about such things." Goneril said lightly. She trotted on ahead, dragging Celia with her. Celia tried to pull her hand away, but found herself incapable. Goneril's grip was just too strong.

"Goneril should focus on her unique strengths." Charlotte said. "She's not a fighter... she's a bloodhound."

Goneril turned back and smiled at her. Celia shook her head.

They continued along past rows of dead bodies, mostly cult members.

"American was here." Celia noticed dryly. "These are bullets from his car."

"I wonder what his wife tastes like." Goneril said, a sliver of drool coming out of her mouth.

"Goneril!" Celia had never heard Charlotte be so angry.

Goneril turned back around, laughing jovially, and then suddenly shot back into Celia's arms.

"Eeeek!"

Celia wrapped her arms around her and held her close as a figure stepped out from the shadows behind them.

"It's just me." Diablo said. "I'm on your side, remember?" He flicked a cigar to the side.

Celia frowned at him, as she pushed Goneril away. The vampire happily shifted herself so that she was hugging Goneril from behind.

"Oh yes, the bounty hunter." Celia said cautiously. Diablo had been introduced to her as a mentor and friend to American and Soleil, but Celia honestly didn't know what to make of him. She could tell by his aura that his powers were hellish in nature... but he did not seem to be a witch.

"Where is the rest of your squad?" Diablo asked, his eyes flickering over them.

"We got separated during the fighting." Celia told him. "Where's... ah, Persephone?"

"Same story." He said shortly. "This castle... it's putting up more of a fight than the enemy itself is."

Celia could hardly disagree. She had noticed that many of the pale, human like creatures that had thrown themselves at her were wraiths spawned by the castle itself.

"We should join forces." Celia suggested. "I... Um... am uncomfortable being alone with this one."

Goneril cooed and nuzzled her neck.

"Fine by me." Diablo said. "Come on."

He turned away from them and began walking away. Celia stepped forward, and spoke quietly under breath to Charlotte:

"Can I trust him?"

"He's a very famous demon hunter in this part of the world."

Charlotte said lazily. "He was present when Soleil's Mother was paralyzed...he fought for her and saved her life. Soleil trusts him implicitly. I can assure you that she's very picky about the company she keeps."

"You know Soleil better than anyone, it seems."

"We've been friends since we were children." Charlotte said. "She's like a little sister to me... I daresay I know her better than she knows herself."

Diablo glanced back to look at her. Celia fell silent as she stepped forward. Goneril had now wrapped her arms around her neck, and was being dragged along behind her.

"The vampire..." Diablo said. "How does Charlotte Harker have such control over her?"

"I haven't a clue." Celia answered, truthfully. She knew that Charlotte was listening to their every word, and yet did not bother to explain herself.

"I don't like it." Diablos said shortly. "She's done something to her. I've never known a vampire to be so-"

He stopped. He held out his arm to Celia and she stopped. Goneril clenched her arm around her neck.

"It's her." She purred.

A girl that looked very much like Celia was standing at the end of the hallway. Celia felt her heart seize up in her chest.

The girl stared right at them.

"M-Mother?"

Celia pushed Goneril off of her and quickly trotted forward.

"No!" Diablo shouted, as he leapt forward and pushed her to the ground. A great burst of fire shot towards them and almost burnt them to a crisp. Goneril let out a startled yelp and fell down onto her back.

"Ha ha ha ha...."

Celia felt her heart go cold. She pushed herself off the ground and stood next to Diablo, at the thing that had attacked them.

"She's possessed." Diablo said darkly, as the girl advanced towards them. "By Ignis himself!"

"What?"

Celia stared at the girl in horror. She was, perhaps, eighteen or nineteen years old, but the aura she was emanating was nothing but pure evil. The monster glowered at them, her long orange hair

billowing behind her like a wraith. In this state she could harness the vast majority of Ignis' significant power. It was possible she could kill every single one of the opposing army with little effort.

Dante drew a large sword. Celia turned to look at it in horror. She could make out the image of a woman in the bright blue gem of the sword before it began to emanate a bright blue light.

The demon shrieked and recoiled as Diablo advanced, the sword aloft.

"You're not going to fight her?" Celia asked, horrified.

"We have to." Diablo said grimly. "Ignis is too powerful for the likes of me to exorcise from such an ideal host. Killing her is the only option."

"N-no!"

Celia trotted forward.

"Cordelia, listen to me." She begged her. "Your mother was my twin sister! My name is Celia Rosenbaum... I'm your auntie!"

The possessed girl looked at her. For a brief moment Celia thought she had gotten through to her.

"I'd have you too, girl." It sneered. Celia stiffened, glowering hatefully at it as Diablo stood his ground, the sword still held aloft.

"I have to do it, girl." He told her. "I can kill her now and give her peace. If you get in my way you'll get us all killed."

Celia stepped forward. The dual war fans that she had carried into battle fell out of her hands and clattered onto the ground.

"Cordelia..." She took a step forward. "I... love you. We've never met, but you're family. My sister and I always wanted children of our own and I... care about you."

The girl did not move as Celia came within inches of her.

"Please..." She whispered. "Fight..."

She held out her arms and wrapped them around her. The girl flinched. She stood there completely still for a moment, and in one

furious blow caught Celia straight in the chest with a punch, blowing her heart out.

"No!"

Celia smiled grimly as she clung onto Cordelia's body.

"Love... you..." She rasped. And then she was still.

The girl stood there for a moment, and then blinked.

"Where... am I...?" She said. She let out a screech as she took note of the body clutching her. She pushed it away and it fell at her feet with a crash.

Goneril bounced up behind Diablo and bent over the body.

"I like you better like this." She said, as she bent her head down to Celia's chest, which was completely covered in blood. Diablo stepped up behind her and yanked her back up by the scruff of the neck. Cordelia stared.

"Come on, kid... as long as you're in control and with me I can repress the possession. Come with me if you want to be free."

She bit her lip, nodding, and then followed.

Sinistra

"So, uh.... She's dead, right?"

Sinistra prodded Soleil's still body with her foot, as if half expecting her to leap to life and begin fighting again.

"She is not." Kamura denied. She sipped her tea.

"Why?" Sinistra exploded. "You're going to give me a heart attack!"

"She's worth more to us alive." Kamura said. "If the enemy realizes we have defeated their ace... their morale will drop." She smiled.

"Her husband, especially, will be rattled."

"The husband would be single again if you killed her now." Sinistra said. "I need her dead."

"I know your feelings." Kamura said. "And I would advise you to forget them... the man does not return your affections and never

will. You are in love with a ghost.”

Sinistra scowled at her.

“I speak the truth.” Kamura said. “You are very young... you still do not realize that love will not bring you happiness.”

“Love is all I have.”

Kamura gave her a hard expression.

“Then you have nothing at all.” She said simply. She returned to her tea. When she finished her cup, she placed the helmet back on her head and stood up.

“Come with me.” Kamura said. “Help me leave an impression on our enemy.”

Sinistra dutifully wrapped her arm around Soleil and lifted her off the ground.

They reached the castle ramparts and looked out over the horizon. They could see a small gathering of the enemy right outside of the castle gates. The Order of the Dragon,

“The woman is Christian, yes?”

Sinistra eyed the cross shaped necklace wrapped around Soleil’s neck. “Uh, it doesn’t take a genius to say yes.”

Kamura raised her hand. Steel began to creep from her armor and into her hand. It began to mold into a great shape. A wicked looking cross formed in her hand.

She slammed the cross into the castle rampart, embedding it deep. Sinistra took off into the air, dragging Soleil behind her, and turned around.

Giant steel nails came from Kamura next. Sinistra her to hold each of her arms aloft as her hands were pierced, nailing her to the cross.

Sinistra giggled. Soleil’s head was hanging limp in mid-air. She looked positively pathetic. Sinistra cupped her chin in her hand and lifted it up.

"He's mine for the taking now." Sinistra whispered. She landed on the wall beside the cross and leaned up against it.

The crowd below her had noticed them now. They could see a blonde girl notice them first. She pointed them out to the others, and soon enough they all were looking up at them.

"Behold!" Sinistra said dramatically, as she lifted off the ground and descended towards them. "Your hero, Soleil Freeman!"

She turned around and kicked Soleil in the face. She reeled, shuddering. Kamura had to steady the cross with her hand to keep it from snapping in two.

"Soleil has fallen, but Kamura still stands!" Sinistra shouted. "Kamura is the strongest of us all! There is not a man or witch among you who can destroy her!"

Kamura stood steadfast, staring down at the crowd below with a critical eye. All of their best fighters had entered the castle. None of those who had to retreat would be any match for her.

Sinistra raised her hand. An intense flame emanated from it. She clutched it into a fist and it sparked with an ferocious glow.

"Behold!" Sinistra called to the crowd. "The death of Soleil Blade!"

Isobel

"You will not touch her."

Sinistra froze. She could feel her heart stop in her chest. She cast a horrified look at Kamura, who had stiffened.

"What the hell was that?" Sinistra asked.

An evil aura seemed to be emanating from the castle. It was not the familiar sense that one exposed to the Ignis usually felt... no. This was something else.

"I have been granted power." The voice intoned. *"Behold!"*

An intense explosion of black energy erupted from the castle. Sinistra screamed, as the sheer force and energy of the blast sent

her reeling backward. Kamura stood tall, staring down at the explosion with a steely gaze.

There, sitting in the middle of the entrance hall of the castle, was a strange black egg. Sinistra recognized it instantly.

"It's a witch." She said. "She's.... ascending."

"Hahaha..."

Cracks began to run up and down the egg.

"Behold! A star of chaos is born!"

Dark miasma began to seep up from the sides of the egg. The material began to melt away, exposing the person inside.

It was deep black in color. Its head, which had once been human, had morphed into that of a monster. A large head held together by rows of razor sharp teeth. A snake like tongue licked its black lips, as it spread its insect like wings behind it. Its long, insect like arms ended in vicious claws that dripped with a pure black miasma.

A sinking feeling began to rise up within Sinistra.

"What is that?" She demanded to Kamura.

"A Creature born from the deepest corners of Hell." Kamura answered. "A demon most Evil and foul..."

"Evil?" The thing asked. *"If that is what it will take to destroy you... then let me be evil!"*

The inky black substance that had eroded the black egg seeped over her. It hardened, forming an armor plating that was embedded into her very skin. She stared up at them, and her gaze fixed squarely on Soleil.

"Soleil... let me be the one to protect you."

Sinistra shot forward like a rocket. She blasted across the sky and raised her fist.

She was still moving when Isobel appeared behind her.

"Wha-"

Isobel swung both of her hands down in a hammer strike. Sinistra shot through the sky, faster than she had been moving, slamming through stone towers and out the other side. She continued flying into the distance, and out of sight.

Kamura took off, her hammer raised, as Isobel shot towards her. Kamura's keen eye saw her coming, and swung her hammer in an arc to try to swat her out of the sky. Isobel, moving at her high speed, whirled around her in a circle, looking for an opening.

She dove in from below, towards the legs. Kamura shot downward, kicking out. Isobel dodged, but Kamura followed that up without another hammer swing.

The black miasma shot out from her pores, covering the hammer in inky black substance. In a matter of second the hammer had melted.

"What-"

The hammer connected with Isobel, and it shattered upon impact. Isobel's smile began sick and twisted as she lunged for Kamura, attacking her with a series of furious swipes.

"Agh!"

The black miasma emanating from her fingers cut right through Kamura's Japanese armor. It ate away at it far faster than it could regenerate. And what was more, it was beginning to seep onto her skin.

Kamura let out a pained gasp, pulling away slightly, as Isobel went for a critical blow. Kamura held her hand out, and a giant blade began to mold into her hand. She didn't even bother giving it a hilt.

The blade stabbed towards Isobel's armor, and it connected and broke. Kamura barely had time to react as Isobel struck at her again with her miasmic claws, tearing through her armor and devouring her flesh.

"Ugh!"

Kamura's steel grew and melted around Isobel's arm. She stopped, tugging backward wildly, as the steel began crawling over itself,

layering itself so deep that the miasma couldn't eat through it as quickly.

Isobel tried striking her with her other hand, but Kamura caught it. Again the steel began to melt over it, holding her upright right in front of her.

"Ya!"

A number of pointed blades sprouted from Kamura's chest plating and shot towards the enemy all at once. They contacted her armor and shattered on impact, but wave after wave of them came. Soon the black armor began to shudder and crack, and then...

SPLURRRRGH

Kamura's blades cracked her open, splitting her in half. Black miasma shot all over, landing among the castle walls and all over the armor.

It melted through it in seconds. Kamura screamed as the miasma ate away at her helmet, her head, and then eventually... her brain. She hung limply in mid-air... and then began to fall.

Isobel stayed aloft. Her arms ripped out of their sockets by Kamura's falling weight, but she was still flying. Her eyes fell on Soleil.

She flew towards her, and then landed in a heap at the cross at her feet. Soleil was staring down at her. Isobel slowly raised her head and began to limply climb up the cross.

"Isobel..." Soleil said softly.

She placed her clawed hands on the nails on the cross and began to wiggle them around, loosening their grip on her. She pulled them out, one at a time. Soleil's body fell to the ground, and Isobel soon followed suit. Soleil, fighting through the pain, sat up and made her way towards her. She wrapped her arms around Isobel's upper body and lifted it off the ground.

"Isobel..." She said again, staring down at her face. "You did this.... For me?"

Isobel smiled at her softly. The light was already fading from her eyes.

"Better you live... than me..."

Soleil brought her body close to her head, and for the first time since she was eight years old she began to cry.

Soleil

"Isobel's dead." Soleil said tonelessly, as she rejoined the others at the base of the castle. Windsor Poppy was busy fussing over her injuries... sealing the nail wounds on her hands and whatnot.

"So is Jillian and Celia." Charlotte said grimly. "But we recovered her niece Cordelia though... Goneril's bringing her here now."

"Ignis Kamura was seen as a titan among the Ignis." Poppy said quietly, the green light emanating from her hands. "The Windsor will sing of Isobel's sacrifice for eons."

"That isn't going to bring her back to life, now is it?" Soleil snapped. Poppy did not flinch at the reprimand. She continued tending to her wounds.

"Be nice to your nurse, Soleil." Charlotte admonished. "I imagine you're going back into the field?"

"Once I'm healthy, yes." Soleil said.

"I'm afraid that I can't allow that." Poppy said. "You're in no condition to fight... you've been through the ringer. Being crucified is no joke."

"What I went through is nothing compare to what Christ-"

"Comparing yourself to our Lord and Savior isn't going to make us change our mind." Charlotte interrupted. "You're staying here, and that's final."

Soleil's eyes flashed. "You would ask me to allow my husband in there? Alone?"

"Yes." Charlotte told her. "You're worthless to him right now."

Soleil grimaced.

"We thought that I would be the drive force behind the invasion." She said quietly. "And yet I haven't managed to land a single kill."

"You've been busy." Charlotte said. "Keeping Sinistra and Kamura occupied saved tons of lives. I can only imagine what would have happened if Kamura had fought anyone else out there... it would have been a bloodbath."

She turned towards Poppy. "That makes six of the Nine?"

"Yes." Poppy said quietly. "Francesca, Arrakeen, Thorn, Yvette, Kiara, and now... Kamura."

"That leaves Hilda, Ninian... and English."

Before Soleil could respond, Minerva came in.

"Diablo and his party are approaching." She said shortly. "There were no major incidents on the way back."

"Yes, thank you Minerva." Charlotte said idly, as she reached for her pen and paper and documented the event, alongside the time. "Well it seems like there have been a number of casualties on both sides... I suppose we need to start tending to our wounded. Perhaps we should call Eilonwy back, and have her join you in first aid, Poppy."

"No, I can handle it." Poppy said earnestly. "As long as the patient doesn't move!" She added, as Soleil twitched.

"Well at any rate you'll have your work cut out for you." Charlotte said. "But I daresay that all Cordelia will need is rest... is it possible she could succumb again to possession, Soleil?"

"Yes." Soleil said. "But she's done a remarkable job fighting it even under enemy territory. I doubt that she will succumb again once she is among friends. Especially if that friend is Diablo Mondo."

"Well you're the closest thing we have to an expert." Charlotte said. "But I've arranged for her to be taken back to the women's shelter... the closer she is to the battlefield, the more chance she has of relapsing."

Zane

Zane slid the sword back into his sheath. His enemy, the Ignis swordsman, fell onto the ground.

"A little bit extravagant, are you?" Alisa asked him.

"I do not know what you mean." Zane said quietly. "Your gauntlets..."

They looked more worn and damaged than he had ever seen them.

"It's the temperature of their flames." Alisa explained. "This thing was built to resist aura and magic attacks... but, uh, that also includes my own... so they tend to get banged up pretty easily. It's not usually a problem since I can do repairs outside of battle, but-"

She sighed and shook her head.

"Your machina will be the death of you." Zane said.

"And your lack of tact will be the death of you."

"Enough." Zachariah rumbled, as he came up from behind them. His own sword was covered in blood. "Alisa, do you need to take time for repairs?"

"Hm." Alisa said. "I don't know.... We can't afford to take the time, can we?"

"It's up to you."

"I'll keep going." Alisa said, after a moment's consideration. "We-"

She stopped.

Stomping down the hallway towards them was a great, fiery dragon. Its head resembled the shape of Ignis itself: goatlike and flaming. Its horns protruded outward in a spiral shape. It was an unsettling sight.

"Knights of the Dragon!" The creature cried. "It has been too long!"

It bobbed its head back and forth, rather like a snake.

"Hilda." Zane said immediately. "The Dragon of Ignis."

"That is correct." Hilda said. "I once terrorized the mountains of Italy... until your Order drove me out!"

Smoke protruded from her nostrils as she spoke.

"A pity you weren't slain." Zachariah said. "That is an oversight we must correct."

Zane drew his sword, and Alisa readied herself. Hilda laughed.

"You think you can best me?" It asked. "In these halls?"

She was so big that she filled up the entire space of the hall. Maneuvering around her would be impossible. They would have to tackle her from the front. They would not be able use their superior numbers to surround and overwhelm her.

"What do you think, boss?" Alisa asked Zachariah.

"A swift clean cut to the head should do it." He said. "Zane?"

Zane stepped forward, drawing his katana.

"You are not a man of Japan." Hilda said, glaring down at him with great dislike. "A true katana from a true samurai would cut right through me... but anything less would simply break on my scales."

"I am no samurai." Zane said quietly. "But I am a swordsman, nonetheless."

"Ha ha." Hilda said. "Everyone knows that the Japanese are the world's greatest swordsmen! What hope have you to-"

Hilda screeched as a deep cut slashed into her chest. None of them had even seen Zane move.

"I've worked hard to become their equal." Zane said quietly, as Hilda lowered her gaze, staring down hatefully at him. "I have faith enough in my ability to destroy you."

Alisa stepped behind him, holding her gauntlets in front of her.

"Zane, stop it." She hissed. "We can't afford to take risks! Kill her now and be done with it!"

Hilda steadied herself and stared down at Zane with great disdain.

"I have heard stories of a man among the Order of the Dragon who has tried to emulate the samurai." She rasped. "I never thought it would be you."

She dug her front claws into the stone in front of them. She lowered her head and breathed lava.

"Watch it!" Alisa said, as the floor beneath them began to melt. The lava seeped out of her head and it swept over the stone.

"We're on a higher floor!" Zachariah called. "Freeze it in place or destroy it... it's up to you!"

Alisa bit her lip, giving a small nod. She raised her palms, and pointed them to the floor.

An intense explosion followed. Hilda fell, her heavy body causing the entire floor around them to collapse. The three knights leapt onto the falling debris, trying to get into position as the great beast spread her wings, slowing her descent.

The great goat like head snapped towards Zane, who leapt to the side and slashed at her head. She dodged, rather like a snake, and Zachariah stepped in, swinging his blade widely. His sword ricocheted off of her tough scales.

Hilda lunged her claw forward and caught Zachariah in mid-air. He cried out, struggling, as she crushed his skull into pulp.

"No!" Alisa leapt forward. She punched the beast's head with her gauntlet, and it reeled. Her claw shot upward and slashed at her, and it dug straight into her arm.

"Ahhhhh!"

Hilda snatched Alisa out of the air and brought her up towards her mouth. Alisa struggled wildly as the teeth and fangs bent down over her, and bit down. In a last ditch effort, Alisa freed her left arm and thrust it between her jaws.

The dragon bit down hard on the gauntlet. Alisa screamed as her arm was ripped from her body. She bit down the scream in her throat and focused her magical energy into the gauntlet that was still in Hilda's mouth, forcing as much of her energy into it as possible.

The gauntlet exploded. Hilda threw her head back wildly, the explosion throwing her off for a split second. In a flash Zane leapt forward, and with one smooth stroke slashed off her head.

They all fell. The bodies of Zachariah and Hilda fell to the ground with a thud. Alisa, still clutched tightly in Hilda's grip, hit the ground and rolled. Zane landed right next to her.

"Are you alright?"

Alisa was still sobbing as Zane tried to help her up.

"My arm... my arm..."

"Be thankful it was only that." Zane chided her. "Take pride! We won."

Alisa nodded, gritting her teeth. She took a deep breath, and tried to calm her hysteria.

"You're in no condition to keep fighting." Zane said. "I'll escort you back to safety, and then rejoin battle myself."

"Z-Zachariah...."

"We have to leave him." Zane said firmly. "It is too dangerous here. We can recover the bodies after we win."

"Yes... yes, of course." Alisa said. Her lifetime of training for this moment took over. She allowed Zane to wrap his arm around her and help her to her feet. She tried focusing her inner energy on stopping the bleeding. She felt calmer.

"Can you walk?"

"I still have my l-legs." Alisa quipped. Her voice faltered slightly at the last word.

American

The car came to a screeching halt. All four tires exploded into flame. The Engine exploded in their faces, destroying the entire car around them.

The wreckage was still smoking as Dante and American climbed out of the car.

"Kind of rough, huh boy?"

Dante barked his approval.

The figure standing behind them twirled his baton in his hand.

"American Freeman." He said. "You've caused enough trouble."

It was a cop. He was about American's age, perhaps twenty years old, but had already grown into the uniform of Ignis. He stepped towards them lightly, his eyes fixed squarely on them.

"You're under arrest."

American drew his gun and fired. The cop raised the baton and slapped the bullet out of the air, sending it spinning.

"Too good for a cop." American said. "Who are you, really?"

"My name is Chris Kreese." He said. "I'm the best cop in Ignis."

He got into a fighting stance.

"And I'm going to kill you."

American glanced upwards.

"What is at the top of this tower?"

"Nothing of consequence." Kreese answered. "You can't go up there."

American grinned. "I thought I could do whatever I like in Ignis?"

Kreese hit his palm with the baton.

"Don't be coy with me." He said. "If your actions harm someone else, you have to be stopped."

"Sounds an awful lot like a law to me." American growled.

"It does not matter what you think." Kreese said. "You WILL be stopped. By me... or by someone else."

He pointed the baton at him.

"Don't fight back. It'll be worse if you do."

American shot the man again and he ducked, bending his body over as he broke out into a sprint. American fired shot after shot at him, but his speed and reflexes were so great that every bullet missed.

Dante leapt forward, teeth bared, and the man swung his baton in an arc, catching him in the jaw. He flipped over, sprawling out on the ground, his neck broken, as American closed the distance between them, trying to land a shot.

The man swung the baton, and American caught his arm with his free hand. Chris swung his other hand across his face.

"Your enemy is mortal. His power is nothing if you use it against him."

American dodged the attack, grabbed hold of his leg into a leg, and threw himself forward. The man cried out as American threw him onto his back.

CRACK

American broke the other man's leg.

The man lunged at him pitifully with his baton. American grabbed hold of that and snapped that too.

"No, stop!" The man begged. "If you kill me, you'll be just like me!"

American ripped the baton from his now useless hand and raised it upward. He brought it down with a sickening crunch onto his head, silencing him forever.

He turned around and faced the body of Dante. He stared down at it.

"I'm sorry." He said quietly. He leaned forward and patted his head affectionately. He stood up and turned around.

Without another thought he stood up and climbed the stairs to the second floor.

He found himself in a small shrine to Ignis. The Head Priest of the Ignis Cult sat kneeling in front of the large statue of Ignis before him.

"You came." The man said, as the door slammed shut behind him.

"After your wife killed poor Nicholas, I knew it was only a matter of time."

"Who are you?"

"I am Ozmund Salazar. I am the head of the Church of Ignis... and the man who mentored Nicholas in everything he knew."

"He wasn't a very good Christian." American observed. Ozmund laughed.

"I imagine not. Our Church goes against all Christian teachings by its very nature... please do not think Nicholas was anything unusual. All religious men are just like him."

He stood up. He turned to face American. The glinting metal mask shaped in the face of Ignis glinted in the bright candlelight.

"Tell me, boy." He said. "Do you truly wish to kill your own mother?"

"Yes." American answered him.

"So be it." The man said.

The entire shrine into flames. American felt the cool water wraith armor wrap around his body to protect him from the overwhelming, hellish heat.

"This is fire from Ignis itself." Salazar told him. "No other environment would be more fitting for our battle.

He raised his arms high, and his arms and legs burst into flame. He hovered in the air, shifting back and forth in place like a spectre.

"May the flames of Ignis consume you! Those who threaten our freedom will be destroyed!"

American raised his father's gun and fired. It slammed into the man's goat mask, splitting it in half, and blew his head wide open.

"I'm free to stop you.." American said coldly, as the body tumbled backward onto the floor. He stepped past the still body of Salazar to the stairway to the next floor-

There was no one here. It took American a while to realize what he was looking at: This was Sinistra's room. The things that were strewn about were dear to them both.

He stopped at her desk and glanced at it. A photograph of his father, his mother, Sinistra, and himself was there. Sinistra was smiling in it. He stared at it for a while. He felt a strange pang in his heart. Those happy days... were nothing but a lie.

He proceeded to the fourth floor.

"It's you."

His mother gestured to the tea table in front of her.

"I was just having some tea." She said conversationally.

"While your followers fight for their lives?" He asked coldly, as he stepped forward.

"I am under no obligation to protect them." She said idly. "If they wish to survive in the new world... they will protect themselves. If not..."

She shrugged her shoulders. American stared at her. He felt an intense rage bubbling up within him.

"What is it?" She asked.

American raised his leg and kicked the table over.

His mother sat idly, her hands folded in her lap, as she watched him.

"Why do you do this, American?" She asked. "Is this not what you wanted? To see this city destroyed?"

"I thought you cared about them." American shouted at her. "I thought you were going to fight!"

"I will fight for my own freedom." She said. "My enemy is whoever threatens that freedom."

She smiled up at him.

"I will be honest with you, my son. I care much more about you than I do them."

She stood up." The wooden chair she was sitting on exploded into flame.

"The choice is yours." She said. "Threaten me, or my Master... and I will be forced to defend myself. But otherwise... when this is all over... I would very much like to be a grandmother to your children."

American drew his gun and pointed it at her.

"You don't want to do this." English said quietly. "Even now, you don't hate me. Or Sinistra either, for that matter. You know now the circumstances from which you were born... No one in this city needs to be protected by any higher power... be they government, god, or man. Destroy those you despise if you must, but never forget that you only have one Mother!"

American pulled the trigger. The bullet fired from the gun and hit her in the head. It bounced harmlessly off.

"Yes..." English said quietly. "Your father died to protect you... to protect us. That weapon is useless against me."

"But not against your master."

"Yes..." English said. She looked very sad. "Please don't make me hurt you, American."

He swung the butt of the gun at her head. She grabbed his hand and twisted it out of his grip. American grimaced. And kicked out at her leg, trying to throw her to the ground.

Her body burst into flame, and American pulled back, flinching, as she pulled away from him.

"You can't destroy me." English said quietly. "You're far too weak."

American glared at her. The water wraith was wrapping around him.

"That toy." English said contemptuously. "You think you can best me with such a thing?"

American threw a punch at her. She dodged, and a shot of water burst from his fist and hit her across the face. She reeled, steam rising from her face as a bright red mark appeared on her cheek.

"What was that about not being able to hurt you?" American asked.

"Stop this." English commanded. "Or I will destroy this entire castle, and your friends with it."

The walls of the room began to shudder and shake. She meant it, and had the power to do it.

"Even my wife?" American demanded.

The tower stopped quaking.

"You can always find another." His mother said quietly.

"Soleil is the only girl for me." American said. "And if we're going to live in peace... I have to destroy you. And your master too. I will not raise my family to follow in your path."

"You would betray your only family?"

"No. I will start my own."

English brought her hands to his neck and gripped it. His water wraith cloak was still wrapped tightly around him, so her hands had to bury themselves deep into it to reach him. Intense bursts of steam began to emanate from it as she lifted him up the ground, throttling him.

"We are family!" She shouted at him. "You would throw it all over for people who care nothing for you? This place was accursed before we ever set foot here! America is not free, American Freeman!"

American pressed his hand on her wrist and tried to pull her away from him. But her grip only became tighter. The water wraith tried defending itself from her with lashes from its water tendrils, but English simply stood there and allowed her body to take the hits.

"What do you think will happen if you destroy me?" She asked. "Do you think the people will love you? Do you think that-"

Something thudded against the windowsill.

She stopped. She turned her head as the wall behind them began to crumble.

It shattered. A broken and bloody Ninian fell through, her helmet removed, and her armor ripped to shreds.

"She got in my way." Soleil Freeman said breathlessly, as she stepped into the room. "Put him down."

English threw American to the side.

"Well well well." She said idly. "If it isn't my beloved daughter-in-law."

"Do not call me that." Soleil said sharply. "You have long ago forfeited your right to call yourself his mother."

She stepped into the room. Ninian weakly tried grabbing at her leg to try and stop her, but she stomped down on her face, shattering her head into pieces.

"You truly are remarkable." English said, as Soleil strode into the room. "Your powers far surpass my expectation... I daresay the only reason my son made it this far was because of you."

"No." Soleil denied. "The only reason I am here at all is because of him."

"Yes..." English said considering her words. "You have devoted your life to hunting Amaris Yew... and yet you married my son. A child of Ignis who has refused his own heritage..."

American tried to sit up. His head was ringing.

"It is his humanity that I love." Soleil said quietly.

"His humanity?" English asked. "My father and his father's father were one and the same... Ignis! He is more demon than man! If you believe he can absolve himself of his heritage you are dearly mistaken!"

American grit his teeth and shakily got to his feet.

"He chose humanity over his own desires." Soleil said. "To protect others and serve as a guiding light for those around him... even when he believed that it could not be done. He is more of a man than any other in this city- especially not his grandfather!"

English hissed in a primal rage. It was sacrilegious to a witch to hear an insult aimed at her master.

American raised the gun. He slowly pointed it towards Soleil. She met his eyes as he fired the gun.

She swung the sword, hitting the bullet in mid-air and sending it back towards English. She smiled as the bullet hit her, and blew a hole open in her head.

"W-what?" She gasped, as she staggered. "H-how?"

Soleil stepped closer to her.

"It was by my power that felled you." She said quietly. "Not your husband's."

Soleil punched her in the stomach and she bent over. Blood and brains splattered all over the stone floor.

"This- isn't possible..." English rasped. "How are you this strong?"

Soleil raised her hand and reached for the hole in her head. She placed her fingers in the wound and pulled apart.

She ripped her head completely open. Blood and brains splattered onto the floor at their feet. Soleil watched her body for a moment, ensuring that she was dead, before quickly stepping towards American.

"Are you alright?" She asked cautiously.

"Yeah." American said. "I have the best wife in the world."

Soleil helped him up, and after a brief moment's hesitation, patted off the dust on his shoulder and straightened his collar.

"Now's not the time for that." American said. "The summoning..."

They turned to the last set of stairs.

"The fifth floor..." Soleil said quietly. "That must be where they are summoning the beast."

"My grandfather."

"Don't call him that." Soleil said sharply.

American laughed. He took her hand and the two of them stepped up the stairs together.

"I might not be able to protect you like this." Soleil said cautiously. "I should take point."

American released her and she stepped up the stairs in front of him, her sword at the ready. He placed his hand on his father's gun as they stepped into the Final Room.

There was nothing here other than the summoning circle. They proceeded cautiously.

"We've killed everyone who could finish the summoning." Soleil said quietly. "All of the nine. All that's left to do now is dispel the summoning circle."

"Can it be done?"

"We need an expert's opinion." Soleil said. "Eilonwy, perhaps. Or one of the –"

She stopped. She looked upward.

"What is it?"

Soleil set the sword aside and drew a gun. She pointed it to the ceiling and started shooting. The stone blasted apart.

Just above them, on the highest point of the castle, was Sinistra. She was breathing heavily- her face looked bloody and bruised. She was clinging on to the flag placed on the very tip of the castle spire.

"You killed her!" Sinistra shouted down at American. "You killed your own Mother!"

"I did that." Soleil said quietly. Sinistra laughed shrilly.

"Oh yes. One in body and soul, are you? The perfect couple."

Her body began to light up and sparkle.

"I have nothing else to live for!" She called down to them. "Behold! The dawn of our new world!"

Soleil shot at her. The bullets harmlessly phased through her. Her entire body had caught fire.

"American!"

He had already drawn his own gun and fired. The bullet shot upward, and slammed straight into her head.

It exploded into flame.

"No-" Soleil whispered. "She's sacrificing herself to Ignis!"

The flames covering Soleil became even more intense. The skin on her flesh was burning away, and her teeth and bones were becoming more exposed. Her skeleton was smiling.

"I hate this world and everyone in it!" She cried. "Let it burn!"

American stepped forward.

"The Ignis are a selfish breed..." He murmured. "But sacrificing yourself for the Master... would leave a massive impact on the summoning. Soleil, this is bad-"

The entire castle rumbled. They grabbed hold of each other to steady themselves as the tower around them began to fall apart.

"We can't stay here." Soleil said. "It's too late, now! It's coming!"

"American!"

They turned. Just outside of the collapsed wall a Sky Serpent was staring at them.

"Get on!" Eilonwy's voice came from the creature. Without a second's hesitation American took Soleil's hand and dragged her forward. They leapt out of the hole in the wall, and Eilonwy took off into the sky.

"What happened?" Eilonwy demanded. "We had the battle won! What did you do?"

"Sinistra sacrificed herself." American said grimly.

"Oh no..." Eilonwy whispered. "A witch at her level... sacrificing herself... and a virgin too... she's worth perhaps millions of ordinary souls! Ignis Witches aren't usually so selfless!"

"This isn't an act of selflessness." American said grimly, as the Tower continued to crumble as they soared high above it. "This is her dream... to hurt as many people as she can possibly can!"

"She's an evil person." Soleil spat. "An avatar of Hell itself!"

"You're going to get a glimpse of hell very soon." Eilonwy said quietly. "American. We very may well die here."

American gripped her head.

"You've been a good friend to me." He said. "I beg of you... fight with us. Until the bitter end."

In the distance they could see another Sky Serpent flying high above the sky. Diablo, Ichiro, Zane, and Annie were all riding on top of her.

"It's Madelyn." Eilonwy said tonelessly. "We won't be alone when the time comes."

"What about the others?" American asked. "Are they going to fight?"

"The others are too injured to fight!" Madelyn called towards them.

"This is it! Our last stand!"

A giant, clawed hand shot out of the top of the tower. It bent over sideways, clutching the remains of the tower in its claw, and began to pull itself upward.

"NO YOU DON'T!"

Diablo leapt from Madelyn's back. He raised his sword above his head and plummeted hundreds of feet. Ignis raised its head out of the circle and took in its first gasp of air- right as Diablo slammed into its nose.

The nose shattered upon impact. The head reeled to the side, as Diablo leapt backward, jet black, scaly wings protruding from his back.

The demon turned to look at him, and laughed.

"Son of Mondo!" It said. "You turn on your own kind to fight for the humans?"

Diablo drew his sword.

"Yeah." He said darkly. "I like that side of the family more."

Ignis laughed.

"I like human women myself." It said. Its nose began to straighten and correct itself: Its hyper active healing properties were truly something to behold. "Perhaps I will spread my seed across the entire world-"

"Like hell you will!"

Diablo's sword flashed. An intense blue light emanated from it, and Ignis recoiled.

"Now!"

Eilonwy and Madelyn swooped down on either side of him.

"Don't you dare jump off!" Annie snapped towards Ichiro, who was staring intently at Ignis. "You can't fly, remember?"

Zane took his position on Madelyn's head, and drew his sword.

"I'm trusting you to outmaneuver this beast." He said.

"Ignis is no match for my speed." Madelyn promised him. "Don't worry about that. Just focus on good, precise strikes."

She dove down onto Ignis. Zane raised the sparkling silver sword and swung it, digging deep into Ignis' arm.

Ignis chuckled as the wound healed almost instantly.

"His critical points are still in Hell." Zane said to Madelyn. "We won't be able to do any damage until it's fully summoned, but once that happens-"

"It'll all be over."

Ignis continued to rise out of the tower. It seemed that he had had to diminish his own size to fit through the portal: His upper body grew larger and larger as he rose, ballooning up to insane proportions.

His skeletal wings shot out from either side of him, and he flapped them, increasing the speed of his own ascent.

"Eilonwy! What should I shoot?" American asked.

"Ignis cannot be killed!" Eilonwy said. "Our only chance is send him back from whence he came!"

Ignis continued to rise out of the circle.

"If you're going to do something, you better do it now!"

Soleil slid up beside him.

"We must weaken him as much as possible." She said quietly. "And allow the witches time to send him back-"

Ignis raised a giant hand and swiped at Diablo. He swerved out of the way, his glowing blue sword out aloft, and another bright blue shot of energy shot towards him. A deep cut etched itself onto his face.

"Ha!"

American drew his father's gun and fired. The bullet ripped through the air and slammed into the cut. It blew open the wound. Bright red blood poured out of the arm in waves.

"Who dares-"

Ignis raised his head upward and saw American.

"You are of my blood!" It roared. "How dare you raise your hand against me, boy?"

Diablo swerved in. He swung the sword in a wild arc, and cut deep into his neck. Ignis snorted at him, and the intense blasts of flame from his nostrils covered Diablo so completely that for a brief moment that American was convinced he had turned to ash.

When the flames subsided, Diablo was standing there, his clothes in tatters.

"Men and women, warriors all!" Ignis crowed. "Witness me, and know thy end is near!"

Ignis placed one leg on the edge of the tower.

"This is it!" Eilonwy moaned. "If we don't send him back now we've lost!"

American grimaced. Soleil placed her hand on his shoulder as Eilonwy and Madelyn dove down.

"Americana!" Ignis shouted, his voice carrying out loud over the distance. "I'm coming for you!"

PHEW

An intense blast of energy shot from the distance and slammed into the side of Ignis' head. The demon toppled over, collapsing in a heap in its own castle. Its last leg sticking up straight in the air. Eilonwy and Madelyn shot back up. They had missed their chance.

"What was that?" Annie asked, alarmed.

"That was the Star Beam!" Eilonwy said, wide eyed. "They... they actually used it!"

"A what?"

"It's a weapon that possesses enough force to destroy an entire planet! I've never known Americana to use it on a target this far inland!"

Ignis sat up. He rubbed his head and glared across the horizon.

"Coward!" He rumbled. "I challenge you, and yet you send the lowest of your minions?"

He slowly got to his feet. Diablo flapped up to meet him, his sword brandished before him.

"This thing is a Kaijuu!" Eilonwy said. "Conventional weapons won't even scratch it!"

"We need a new plan, Eilonwy." American said. "How do we send him back?"

"I- I don't know!"

"Raaaaaaaaaah!"

Ichiro leapt off of the back of Madelyn and brought Yamato down on his head with a thunderous crash. Ignis did not even flinch as Ichiro slammed it into his head. He found his footing and began pounding over and over again.

"The idiot is going to get himself killed!" Madeflyn snapped. She swooped in to try and retrieve him, but Ignis had already brought his clawed hand up to sway away at Ichiro. He caught Madelyn instead, and Annie leapt off to gain some distance from him.

Zane was thrown through the air, spinning about wildly.

"By my power-"

He brought the sword down onto Ignis' hand.

"Cut!"

Ignis's finger split open. Eilonwy swerved them to the side, allowing American the opportunity to blast it open with his father's gun.

Madelyn quickly shifted her long, slippery body to escape his grip.

"Ha ha ha." Ignis intoned, sounding amused. "Even in that form, I would rape you until your body split in half, Madelyn..."

Annie caught Zane and they both swerved out of the way of the fire that shot out of his mouth as he spoke. He hadn't even been trying to attack yet, and yet the flames overwhelmed them both. Annie wildly spun around, dispersing the flames with wind, as Zane tried swiping them with his sword.

"Stay still!" Annie snapped at him.

"And let you do the fighting?" He retorted. "Only I can cut him!"

"But only I can fly! Stay still and strike when I say you can strike!"

Ignis turned his gaze down on them.

"A little witch, and a little boy playing at samurai!" He said.

"I'm more of a samurai than him!" Ichiro cried, as leapt down onto Ignis's cheek, sliding downward, gripping his skin with his free hand. In his other hand he held Yamato, and he swung it with all of his might into Ignis' eye.

The blow bounced off. Ignis blinked, catching the kanabo in his eyelid. Ichiro was ripped off from the side of the demon and dangled in mid-air, his feet kicking furiously, as Ignis opened his eyelid. He began to fall.

"Aaaaaaah!"

"Here I go!" Eilonwy said, Soleil readied her katana as they swept down to catch them. Ignis again tried to catch them, but Soleil slashed wildly in front of her. American, in six furious blasts, caught the wounds with bullets, destroying his entire hand.

Eilonwy caught Ichiro in her mouth and darted away.

"Husband and wife!" Ignis sneered, as they darted out of range. Eilonwy whirled around and handed Ichiro to American. "Marriage is a lie, love is a joke! Both of you will grow to despise the other, and long for the flesh of younger, more beautiful partners!"

Soleil and American looked at each other.

"That isn't going to happen." American said.

"Yes." Soleil said quietly. "You... you're the one I want father my children."

"Now's not the time for this!" Ichiro snapped, waving Yamato over his head. "Go back! Back!"

"Silence!" Eilonwy snapped. She was narrowly avoiding blasts of fire from Ignis' eyes. "Do not think to command me, child!"

"His hand isn't recovering." Madelyn murmured. "Whatever American is doing is working."

"His father died to protect him." Diablo said. "It's love... the thing Ignis hates most in the world!"

Ignis glowered.

"I see." Madelyn said. "The thought of doing anything for another person goes against all of Ignis' values..."

American glowered. The gun was glowing with a brilliant light in his hand.

"I've waited for this moment for a long time." American said. "The day I strike you down where you stand!"

Ignis threw his head back and laughed.

He raised his injured hand. An intense burst of flame shot out from the stump, and then fell apart. In its place was an entirely new hand.

"No!" Soleil whispered. "He can regenerate?"

"We simply have to damage his body beyond repair." American said firmly. "We mustn't be intimidated!"

"We only have to incapacitate him enough to send him back." Eilonwy said.

"That isn't good enough." American said. "I want to kill it."

"It can't be done!" Eilonwy said sharply. Soleil placed her free hand on American's shoulder and steadied it.

"I know how you feel." Soleil said quietly. "Truly, I do... but do not think that destroying Ignis will fill the void in your heart. If we can do it... we will. But we must accept the possibility that banishing him is the more practical solution."

American took in a deep breath. His eyes, that had briefly turned into a deep bright red, slowly shifted back to green.

"Yes..." He said slowly. "You're right... Soleil."

Madelyn swooped down and Annie grabbed onto her head, pulling Zane along with her. They settled back onto her head as she shot away. Ignis was still distracted with Diablo.

"Why do you side with humans?" Ignis sneered. "A man of your strength could rule this earth!"

"And be overthrown and destroyed like all of the others who have tried?" Diablo asked. "No... I think not. Better to live among them, and grow ever stronger."

"Stronger?" Ignis asked. "What use is strength if you do not use it?" He swung his arm at Diablo, again trying to swipe him out of the air.

"I do use my strength: For good!"

Diablo swerved around the swipe and shot upward. He reached Ignis's nostril and dove inside. The demon breathed out, and an

intense wave of fire shot forward as Diablo climbed up his nose. Fire shot all around him trying to overwhelm him, but Diablo gritted his teeth, his sword clenched in it, as he climbed upward.

"Ugh!"

Ignis shuddered. Bright blue light emanated from the nostril. He raised his clawed hand to his face and jammed his finger into the side of his own nose, ripping it off.

Diablo was nowhere to be seen.

"He's inside the body." Eilonwy said. "American, if he lives, expect-"

Deep gashes began to appear on the side of Ignis' head. Ignis howled and held his hands to his head.

"Now!" Madelyn called.

Eilonwy swooped down. American fired off six shots, nailing each and every one of them, causing huge holes to appear in Ignis' head, Soleil and Zane raised their swords, and slashed at the front of his neck.

Soleil's blade cut half an inch deeper than Zane's.

"What a woman!" Zane breathed, as they shot off in opposite directions.

"Pick your dick off the floor and get ready for the next go round!" Annie shouted at him.

The Sky Serpents whirled around. American reloaded the gun.

"Soleil, I think if we can get the head cut off completely I'll be able to blow it to bits." American said. "Can you cut it!"

"If Zane and I can coordinate perfectly... yes." Soleil said. She bent her leg and readied the katana.

"Do you think me an amateur?" Zane asked, as he copied the movement.

"Is this you trying to flirt?" Annie complained, as they swerved around for the second raid. "She's married!" Eilonwy and Madelyn

dived down, in perfect synchronicity, and crossed each other right by Ignis's neck!

"Ha!" Soleil struck first, and hard. She barely had time to think that it was odd that Zane didn't match her strike, but he soon followed with a second strike- one that perfectly overlapped with her own.

"Amazing!" Annie gaped, as Ignis' head slid off. It was still glowing a bright blue- Diablo was still tearing it apart from the inside.

American raised his gun. And he fired.

BANG

The head exploded.

BANG

The head exploded.

BANG

The head Exploded

BANG BANG BANG

The head burst into tiny little bits. Diablo ended up falling out of the remains in mid-air. He wheeled around in the air for a moment, before taking off.

"We did it!" Annie crowed. "We won!"

"No." Eilonwy said quietly. "This is not enough to kill a demon."

The remains of the head turned to face them.

"Humanity thinks they can destroy the gods!" It snarled. "Behold!"

The remains of the body began to shoot up into the sky. The bones and flesh of the lower half began to fold and twist among itself into a large ball. The head exploded into fire and sinew, and shot up towards it like a comet.

What was now flying above them was a second sun, flying high above their heads.

"No!" Eilonwy moaned. "We are too late!"

"What is it?"

"He's transforming." Eilonwy explained, her voice grim. "All of the damage we have just done... was for naught. In this state he is completely impenetrable."

PEW

A Star Beam shot from the distance and slammed into the great Sun. It connected with the surface and disappeared.

"Like our own sun, he cannot be destroyed in that form." Eilonwy said quietly. "But neither can he attack us- he is sacrificing all of his limitless power for an impenetrable defense."

"A Sun..." Soleil whispered. "Eilonwy. When the real Sun comes out, it will throw the world into chaos. Life on this planet can't handle two suns at once."

The Sun of Ignis pulsed. It seemed to grew larger and more intense.

"It is not a true Sun, but it will continue to grow in power and size as long as Ignis remains in that form." Eilonwy said. "Unfortunately... I can't think of any reason he would come out of it."

The sun pulsed again. American felt a bead of sweat run down his face.

Diablo came up to meet them. He transformed back into his human form and stepped lightly onto Eilonwy's head.

"American." He said. "That is no true sun. It is comprised of Ignis' energy... A being of his own power would be able to enter it."

Ichiro glanced at American.

"Makes sense." He drawled. "But who would turn against his own kind?"

American twisted his lip.

"American, you haven't yet mastered your True Form." Eilonwy said. "Embracing that side of yourself would allow you to enter the sun... but there is a possibility you will never again be fully human."

Soleil stepped forward. She reached for American's hand and squeezed it tightly. She did not speak.

"I don't care what happens to me." American said. "The important thing is... that I bust that thing open."

Eilonwy turned her head around to face him.

"Very well." She said, her voice heavy. "I suppose you always knew things might come to this... this is what we have been preparing for, after all." She seemed somehow despondent. "Oh, American..."

American closed his eyes.

There was a deep well of power inside of him that had he had never unleashed before. It simply needed to be released.

"To embrace this power..." Eilonwy continued, her voice a soft whisper. "You must feel hate."

An intense wave of heat washed over them. The Sun of Ignis was burning ever brighter.

"You must embrace your hatred, and use it as a weapon." She said.

"You must eliminate your natural urge to suppress your rage. You are not human, and never have been. You are nothing but a Monster. A monster who will do whatever it takes to win."

American grit his teeth. Little fangs had begun to protrude out from his mouth.

"Remember!" Eilonwy continued. "Remember how they took everything from you! Remember how they must be destroyed!"

American could feel the skin on his body toughening up. The hand that was still clenched around Soleil's fires grew darker and hotter. Soleil frowned, tightening her grip.

"But do not." Soleil whispered. "Forget who you are."

American opened blood red eyes. Great skeletal wings shot from his back, and he leapt upward into the sky. He slammed into the sun with force and entered the sphere.

There was silence from those below.

"Did he- die?" Annie asked, a touch worried.

The Sun exploded into little sparks. Eilonwy and Madelyn quickly darted out of the way, taking their passengers with them as American stood aloft in mid-air, grappling with a human sized creature.

"This is it!" Eilonwy called. "We have weakened it! It is time to send it back from whence it came!"

"To the depths of hell!" Madelyn agreed.

The twin sky serpents shot forward, surrounding the two identical creatures.

"Which one is American?"

Soleil narrowed her eyes.

"That one." She said. The one she had indicated took a huge hit in the face, shattering its nose. It growled, baring its teeth, and struck back.

"Are you sure?" Eilonwy sounded doubtful.

"I'm his wife." Soleil said. "I know."

Eilonwy swooped in. Soleil readied her blade. She was about to attack the enemy, only for Ichiro to beat her to it.

"BLOOD AND THUNDER!"

"No!" Annie screamed, as Ichiro leapt forward, swinging Yamato over his head.

The demon turned to look at him. It thrust a long claw at Ichiro's throat, but he dodged and smashed Yamato across his head. It smashed into his skull. It was slammed downward, but American dashed under it, catching it in another vicious punch.

Annie leapt from Madelyn and caught Ichiro in mid-air.

"You can't keep doing this!" She berated him wildly, as she tried to swerve upward. "I-"

Ignis opened its mouth and an intense blast of fire erupted from it. Annie instinctively threw herself in front of Ichiro, blocking the brunt of the fire.

“Ahhhh!”

Her clothes burned away to a crisp. Her skin became a deep, horrible black. She began to fall, taking Ichiro with her.

“Idiot!” Ichiro snapped, as he grabbed hold of her still body and whirled around, so that his body was below hers to break her fall. They slammed back into the castle with a thud, breaking through the ceiling and several floors before finally coming to a stop.

Ichiro’s first instinct was to race back into battle. He grabbed Yamato and sat up. He glanced to his side and saw Annie’s body lying limply to the side. She let out a groan, and then shifted to the side. He hesitated for a moment, and then dropped Yamato. He walked over to Annie, and then bent over her.

“Come on.” He said, as he picked her up gently. “You need to see Poppy.”

He turned his back on the fight and trotting down the stairs, back to the encampment.

The Sky Serpents were still swerving in circles above. Zane and Soleil sat on the heads of the beasts, swords held aloft, as Diablo and American faced down Ignis.

“You hate me, do you?” Ignis crowed. “You would use your own power against me?”

American glared at him. He did not speak: He was so consumed by his own rage that he could do nothing more than focus on destroying his enemy.

Eilonwy swerved towards Ignis, and Soleil swung the katana. Ignis whirled on them, punching at Soleil. She took the hit, soaring straight into the sky. American’s expression became shockingly human.

“S-Soleil!”

"American!" Diablo snapped, as Eilonwy whirled back around to catch Soleil out of the sky. "Focus on the enemy!"

Madelyn soon followed suit with her own attack. Ignis grabbed hold of her head.

"When this is over, Madelyn, I will rape you on top of the bodies of your friends!"

Zane stepped forward and slashed at Ignis's head. He lunged forward and bit it, snapping the Katana in two. Zane pulled back, shocked, as Ignis opened his mouth and blasted him with more hellish flame.

"AGGGGGGGH!"

Zane threw himself off of Madelyn to get away from him. He then slammed into the spire of the top of the castle, rolled down, and then fell to the ground.

He did not move.

Madelyn tried breaking free of Ignis' grip. He held her tightly in his arms. American and Diablo moved forward, on either side of him. He grimaced, and then quickly raised his hand, and brought it down on Madelyn's head. She fell limp, her body slumping. He released her, and she fell.

American and Diablo lunged for him, but Ignis simply stood there, blocking both of their attacks with ease. He spun around in mid air, and American was thrown some distance away. Diablo clung onto him, growling, as Ignis smiled at him.

"You aren't half the man your father was!"

Ignis rapidly began to punch Diablo. Blow after blow impacted his heavily armored frame, and it soon began to crack and break under the strain. Finally, it shattered. Diablo fell from the sky, unable to sustain his demon form.

"And now..."

Ignis glanced upwards at Soleil and Eilonwy. "I destroy you!"

He shot upwards towards them. Eilonwy tried to get away, but now that he was no longer surrounded by the enemy Ignis could focus all of his energy on raw speed. He easily caught up with her, and quickly wrapped his hands around her neck-

"Raaaaa!"

American leapt upward, catching him in a vicious uppercut. Ignis reeled backward. Soleil leapt forward, on top of Eilonwy's head, and then American's.

She slashed at his head, cutting straight through it.

"You!" Ignis growled, the cut already healing to reattach the top of his head to the rest of him. "I don't know who you are, girl, but rest assured that once I am through with Madelyn you will be next!"

"STAY AWAY FROM MY WIFE!"

American lunged for him, wrapping his arms completely around him. Ignis struggled as Soleil leapt into the air and plunged back down, stabbing the katana straight through Ignis' head.

"Raaaaaaaaah!" He broke free of American's grip. He grabbed Soleil's leg, and then threw her through the air. She cried out as she flew through the air like a missile. Like a bullet Eilonwy took off after her.

American lunged for Ignis again, trying to overpower him. Ignis laughed as he easily countered all of his moves.

"Is this all the power you possess?" He asked idly.

American attacked him again, and Ignis simply counter punched, sending him reeling.

"You haven't harnessed a fraction of my power!" Ignis said derisively. "I cannot believe one such as you came so far, to face me in battle!"

He raised both of his fists and struck out at American, over and over again. American cried out as, much like Diablo before him, his heavily armored form began to break and shatter under the blows.

American tried to defend himself, and even strike back, but to no avail. Ignis completely overpowered him.

“Raaaaah!”

American made one last final attack, only for Ignis to smash his fist against his head. American shot through the air and slammed into the castle wall, and Ignis raised his mouth and blasted a beam of fire at him.

American screamed as the flame engulfed him completely. He lay against the wall for a split second, and then fell face first onto the roof below.

“Ha ha ha!” Ignis cried. “Your powers are nothing before-”

PEW!

A third beam shot out from the distance. Ignis whirled, holding out his hand.

He caught the beam of light in his hand, crumbled it into a ball, and then threw it back. It soared several miles before exploding.

“You’re next, Americana!” He cried. “This is only the beginning!”

Eilonwy and Soleil landed next to American’s body. Soleil leapt off of Eilonwy’s back and cupped American’s head in her hands.

“I’m sorry.” Eilonwy said quietly. “We’ve failed.”

“No...” Soleil said softly. “He lives. See?” American let out a gasp of breath.

“Daughter of Ilia.” Eilonwy said, her voice heavy. “We must flee this place. Please...”

“Fight...” American rasped. Soleil grasped his hands. “Fight... Fight... Fight...”

“Yes...” Soleil said quietly. “We will.”

Her gaze hardened.

“American...” She said softly. “Isobel sacrificed herself to save us. She thought that it would help us lead to a bright future. And you... you have done the same.”

American stared at her through glazed eyes.

"Listen to me." Soleil said. "Use everything I have to give. Possess me, as Ignis possessed Cordelia. With our combined strength, we will end Ignis once and for all."

"What?" Eilonwy exploded. "Soleil, that's insane! As he is now your soul will devour his!"

"I will allow him to possess me." Soleil said quietly. "I have no reservations about this. I have seen what others have sacrificed in this endeavor. It is now time for me to do the same."

"Soleil..." American rasped. Soleil clutched his hands.

"Hear me, Son of Ignis." Soleil said. "I offer you my flesh and blood... Use my body to destroy Ignis in the name of the Lord!"

American caught fire. The embers from his burning flesh rose upward and entered Soleil's nostrils. She stood there, her eyes closed, and inhaled. More and more of his essence entered her body. She turned around to face Eilonwy and opened her eyes. They were blood red.

"Windsor Eilonwy." The voice that came out of the mouth was both Soleil and American. "Will you fight with us, to the last breath?"

Eilonwy smiled.

"Indeed." She said. "American... Soleil... you're both incredible people. In spite of everything you've happened, you've never lost heart. I admire you!" She raised her hand and American's gun leapt up into it. She leaned forward and strapped it to Soleil's waist.

Ignis turned down to look at them.

"What is this?" He crowed, as Soleil jumped on top of Eilonwy's head. "The woman coming back for another round?" He grinned. "I hope you are half as eager in be-"

Soleil leapt upward. She shot up faster than Eilonwy could move, and caught Ignis in the face with a vicious uppercut.

"Wha-"

Eilonwy shot up after them and caught Soleil, quickly circling out of the way. Ignis whirled around, rubbing his chin wildly.

"This power..." He said. "How have you become so strong?"

Soleil held out her fist.

Ignis bared his teeth as Eilonwy came in for another attack. Ignis tried attacking the Serpent, but Soleil stepped forward and punched him again.

"Agh!"

The angle sent him flying downward, through the castle. He slammed into the castle. He stood up almost immediately, unhurt, but Soleil leapt from Eilonwy and shot down towards him, bursts of fire shooting from her to propel her forward.

"The Ignis Fire Fist?" Ignis demanded. "How-"

The punch connected squarely with his face, sending him into the castle proper. He tried steadying himself and preparing for the next round, but before he could even get his bearings Soleil punched him again, sending him down through another floor.

"Raaah!"

He raised his arms and tried to block the next assault. Soleil easily slipping through his guard and punched him again. They crashed through yet another floor.

"You don't intend to-"

He was knocked through another floor.

"Keep this up forever, do you?"

He was hit through another floor.

They were in the dungeons now, surrounded by fire and lava. Ignis was in his element. The lava shot out from their pools and towards his assailant. The attack connected, but did no damage. Soleil kept moving forward, and hit him again.

There were no more floors to burst through. He lay there, against the earth itself, staring up at his enemy.

"Strike me as you will, child. But I cannot be destroyed!" He snarled.

Soleil hit him again. The Earth did not give way- it simply took the blow, his armor shattering. It reformed almost immediately.

"I cannot be killed!" He said. "I am invincible!"

Soleil hit him again.

"To think that a human would use my own power against me-"

She hit him again.

"It is unthinkable!"

He opened his mouth and tried to blast her with his fire. Soleil took the blast, but the flames intensified. She found herself being pushed back by the force of it, even if the flames did nothing to harm her.

She reached for American's gun and fired into the open, gaping mouth.

Ignis' head exploded in a volcanic eruption. Lava burst from his head as if it was a volcano. Soleil leapt back, getting some distance away from him as she looked down on him.

The remains of the demon lay there in the Earth, still and unmoving. It was dead.

Lava was pouring in around them. Without any more consideration Soleil flew upwards, leaving his body behind.

"S-Soleil!"

The flames on her feet sputtered out, and she fell. Eilonwy swooped down and caught her in mid-air. She rose, high, high in the air above the clouds.

Soleil collapsed. She let out a pained cough.

"It's over..." Eilonwy told her. "It's over, American! Come back to us! It's okay!"

Soleil coughed. Sparks shot out from her mouth. The sparks became a flame, and the flame began a human being. American lay there, completely unconscious. Soleil gave him a small smile, and then

reached for his head. She wrapped her arms around him, holding him closer.

They both passed out.

Eilonwy ensured that they were secured to her back as she flew ever higher. She was alone.

"Kill them now."

The voice of her master Windsor spoke through the winds.

"I cannot." Eilonwy said quietly.

"Do not be coy with me, Eilonwy. The voice said. This man and wife destroyed an Archfiend. They are too dangerous to be left alive. In a generation their children will turn their wrath on us..."

"We are Noctis." Eilonwy said, her voice firm. "They are not our enemy."

There was a very heavy silence.

"I fear that you have doomed us all."

Eilonwy did not reply. The Sun- the real sun,- was beginning to peek out over the horizon. It was a new day.

...

It had been a couple of weeks since the fall of Ignis. Without the High Witches preventing resistance to their particular brand of degeneracy, it did not take long for nature to run its course. Those who tried to continue the old ways were quickly stomped into the ground, and it was not long before Ichiro and Poppy walked the streets of the city, in shock of what they were seeing.

"It's normal." Poppy breathed.

"They're scared." Ichiro said quietly. "Of what will happen if it's not." He held out Yamato in front of him and stared at it. Poppy nodded sagely.

"Yes..." She said. "But if given the opportunity they would do it all again in a heartbeat." She sounded disgusted with the thought.

"Honestly I hate them more than I hated the Ignis..."

"Yeah, well, we won. So what they do now doesn't really matter."

"I suppose." Poppy said airily. "I'm glad you're not like them, Ichiro."

"None of us were." He said brusquely. Poppy felt her heart melt. He was so cool! She was so happy that she could feel like she might fly. Being in love was so-

"It's you!"

They stopped. Ichiro blinked as a girl marched up to them, her fists clenched.

"Yuri." Ichiro said, sounding bored. Poppy recognized her now, up close. She was one of the lesbians at school.

"Yuri?" Poppy repeated, as Yuri reached them, raised a small fist, and punched at Ichiro.

It wasn't a particularly good punch. Ichiro simply stood there and took it. He didn't decide to defend himself. It was Poppy who had to try to stop her.

"H-hey... hands off my boyfriend."

The girl cast her an irritated glance.

"Your boyfriend?" She repeated. "Until he got me pregnant he was mine!"

Poppy gave a start. "W-what?" She glanced back at Ichiro. He stood with his arms crossed.

"She was annoying me, so I dumped her."

"I was telling you that I was pregnant." Yuri stressed.

Poppy's head was spinning.

"But I thought... you were gay..."

"I had both of them Poppy." Ichiro said.

"H-huh?" Poppy felt a strong surge of confusion. Nothing that she had ever been told about boys had ever prepared her for this. "But... well... I suppose... what you did before our relationship is none of my business-"

"You were already together when he did it." Yuri snapped at her. Poppy couldn't handle it anymore. She raised her arm to her face and turned around.

"Waaaaaaaah!" She ran off crying hysterically.

"How could you treat her like that?" Yuri demanded.

"Me? You were the one who told her."

She brushed her hair behind her head with her hand and considered him.

"Well, consider yourself dumped." She said. "Now you need to take some responsibility for what you did to me."

Ichiro took a step back.

"Oh no you don't!" He turned and ran. Yuri chased after him at a brisk pace, yelling obscenities at him. Windsor Eilonwy was watching all of this from her perch on top of a nearby building.

"I tried to warn her." She sighed, before taking off into the sky to comfort Poppy.

...

Annie let out a yawn as she raised her head.

"Oh, it's you." She said brightly, as American approached her. "You're getting around on your own now!"

"Yeah, no need for the wheelchair." American said. "How are you holding up?"

Her smile faded.

"A little better." She admitted. "Oakley's gone... and I miss him a lot... but he lived a good life. And what's more..." She beckoned him forward.

She had built a little outdoor shelter where a golden retriever lay, feeding her puppies.

"I'm disappointed that he didn't live to see them be born." She said. "But I'll do my best to take good care of them."

American leaned forward and picked one up. He examined it carefully.

"Which one is going to be your next familiar?"

Her smile faded.

"I'm not sure I want another one." She told him. "Losing your other half... it hurts. There's a reason plenty of witches don't bother with it."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean-"

She shook her head, smiling.

"No, you're right. I have to move on. For my sake, and for his children." She poked the puppy with her finger. "I think... I'm going to raise them to hunt down the local wildlife. The Ignis fucked a lot of local animals, so there are a lot of half breeds running around. We're going to have to purge them if the local ecosystem is going to recover..."

"You would be really good at that."

Annie looked up at him and blinked. "You think so?"

"Sure." He handed the puppy back to her. She pressed it against her chest, and it nuzzled her affectionately. "You know the land better than anyone I know. If anyone's going to do it... it's going to be you."

Annie felt her heart skip a beat. Eilonwy was right... spending time with American Freeman was bad for the heart.

...

American next found Nora Jameson waiting in a clearing in the forest.

"You haven't been eating." American noticed.

"You can tell?" Nora sighed.

"No, I was told." American said. "Ripley mentioned it to me. She's worried about you, you know."

"Oh." Nora said. "Yes... she's been very kind to me."

She seemed to struggle for a bit.

"Humans... are nice, aren't they?"

"Some would say that witches aren't human."

"Oh, you know what I mean." Nora said. "Father... he hated witches. And yet... he died fighting alongside one."

"What will you do now?"

"Return to Indianapolis, I suppose." Nora said. "I... never liked the idea of returning to Africa."

American said nothing.

"It was my Father's dream, but I never thought it was realistic." She said. "And... I suppose he didn't think so either. In the end he chose to give his life to protect Indiana."

"He hated humans." American said. "But in the end he still chose to fight and die for us..."

"He didn't hate you." Nora said. "He told me... that he saw more of himself in you than he did of the elephants in the zoo." She looked forlornly at the grave.

"I know elephants aren't native to Indiana..." She said. "But I would like... to settle down here. Once I have children."

"You will be more than welcome." American said quietly. "But I think your father's dream should live on. It is a terrible thing to be driven from one's home... I should know."

She stared at him, and then nodded. Her expression set.

"I can only hope my sons turn out to be half the warrior that my father was." She said. "But at the very least I know that they will have good friends in you."

She walked away from the grave. American cast a glance at it, and then to the side. Sitting unattended by itself was a second, smaller grave. It looked rather lonely.

"Thank you, Jillian." American said quietly. "We couldn't have done it without you."

...

Soleil stepped lightly into the Women's shelter. Alisa Coghlan stood up. She had hard at work on her latest project: A statue commemorating the life and accomplishments of Celia Rosenbaum. Her left arm had become nothing but a stump, so she had been working with nothing but her right.

"Hey." She said softly. "How- how are you feeling? No demonic possession or-"

"No demon has been inside me other than my husband." Soleil said dryly.

"That's good." Alisa said, relieved. "Cordelia is... uh, struggling a bit. We have to restrain her whenever she falls asleep, because she keeps having fits."

"Ignis has left its imprint on her."

Alisa bit her lip. And nodded.

"We're going to take her back to Del Drago and have an exorcist look at her." She said. "We got one to come from Indy, but he's not-"

"Is she the Catholic girl?"

An older man with glasses and silver hair stepped up to them. He was dressed in a dark black robe, and wore the mark of the cross on his chest.

"Father." Alisa said. "I-"

He stepped towards her and glared intently on Soleil.

"I have heard much about you." He said. "And all that you have done."

Soleil silently stared back.

"It isn't often that a Catholic is willing to fight." The man said.

"Perhaps... you have been possessed before?"

"Father!" Alisa said, shocked.

"Never." Soleil said firmly. The man stared at her, and then nodded.

"I must ask you come in for a confessional." He said. "I understand that you've shown no signs of possession... but have you been feeling sick at all?"

"A little." Soleil said. "But it has nothing to do with the possession."

"I doubt that." The man said briskly. A scream filled the air.

"Oh, not again." The man said exasperatedly, as he turned back into the side room and shut the door.

"She does that whenever she relapses." Alisa said quietly. "It happens pretty regularly if she isn't attended."

Soleil glanced upward at the stone statue.

"This is lovely."

"Thank you." Alisa said, as she stepped up beside her. "I'm not an artist... but it's easy enough for me to mold stone. I based the look of the statue off of an old photo Zachariah had."

"She would have liked that." Soleil said quietly. "She always felt like a woman out of time."

Alisa smiled, and took her hand.

"You were a good friend to her." She said warmly. "I hope... you can be there for Cordelia as well."

"Of course." Soleil said quietly. "You don't even have to ask." Her eyes flitted to Alisa's other arm. Nothing but a stump remained.

"This will be my last time in the field, I think." Alisa said quietly.

"There's a guy back home who's been asking for my hand and I... uh, should say yes while I still have one to give."

Soleil stared down at it, and then back up at her.

"I hope you will continue to serve." She said quietly. "Your weapons... they saved a lot of lives."

Alisa smiled.

"Once I get my prosthetic installed I'll get right back to it." She said.
"I'll be making things until I die."

The door to the side room opened. Soleil glanced towards it, half-expecting to see the Exorcist again. Instead it was Cordelia.

"O-oh."

She stepped forward, open mouthed, and stared up at the statue. The exorcist trotted behind her.

"I just finished it." Alisa said.

"It's lovely..." Cordelia said, collecting herself. "Thank you..."

She rubbed at her eyes with her arm. Soleil noticed they looked red and strained.

"She looked just like you." Soleil said.

Cordelia looked at her, as if noticing her for the first time.

"Oh... you're that Catholic woman." She said. "You're the reason..." She shook her head. "You're one of the reasons the Order won."

"Yes." Soleil said quietly. "I'm sorry that your Aunt was killed. She was a dear friend."

Cordelia smiled at her sadly.

"I wish I knew her." She said regrettably. "She sounds like- No. She was an amazing woman. I owe everything to her... and to you, of course."

Alisa smiled at her widely.

"We can sit and talk about her if you like." Soleil said. "I too wish I had the chance to know her better..."

"Mrs. Freeman." The Exorcist said quietly. "I have been speaking to my superiors in the Church, and they have suggested to me that Cordelia's unique situation... that being she has far more ties to this city than to our faith... she would be best suited to living here, amongst you. I trust this will be agreeable?"

"Well, of course." Soleil said. "Assuming she has no other relations to take her?"

"She has none." The Exorcist said primly. "And our faith dictates that you cannot simply convert to our religion... you have to serve. Considering her situation... it is for the best that she serve in a non-combat role."

"Ignis still lives on in me..." Cordelia said quietly. "I can still feel him there... pushing me to do evil things. If I am to destroy him I must commit myself to the Order of the Dragon in any way I can."

"That is very noble of you." Soleil said. "American and I will support you. And I know that the Order will do everything in its power to free you from Ignis' lingering influence."

The Exorcist bent his head towards her. Cordelia stepped towards her, and then wrapped her arms around her in a tight hug.

"Thank you..." She said quietly. "Thank you so much."

Soleil awkwardly stood there. She stared up at the statue of Celia Rosenbaum, wishing desperately that it was her standing here in her place.

"You know..." She said slowly. "We never did give this church a proper name."

Cordelia pulled away from her. She was sniffing a little.

"We should name it after Celia." Soleil said. "To honor her memory, and her sacrifice." She turned to the Dragon Priest. "If that is acceptable."

For the first time the priest smiled at her.

"More than acceptable." He said. "If Cordelia wishes it."

Cordelia broke down into tears, nodding furiously. Soleil had to bring herself to hug her to get her to calm down, even a little bit.

...

Madelyn shut the suitcase with a snap.

"You're leaving?" Ripley asked.

"Yes."

"You're not.. abandoning us, are you?"

Madelyn smiled at her. "No, of course not." She said warmly. "But my work here is done... I am needed elsewhere."

Ripley nodded.

"You're a good girl." Madelyn said. "It'll be up to you to shape this city to suit our purposes. Remember... everything we do is to serve the Master."

"I understand." Ripley said quietly. "But... ah, who will teach me ballet?"

"That's a good question." Madelyn hummed. "I'm sure Eilonwy will arrange for a new teacher for you."

"I promised Marley that you would teach us ballet together."

Madelyn laughed. "I don't think her Mother would allow it, unfortunately." She said. "And besides, I doubt Marlene has the temperament for it."

"I think differently." Ripley said. "She is becoming a fine young lady."

"Yes, but not one that is suited to joining our coven." Madelyn said.

"Do not think that being her friend means that you should push her to become a witch. It isn't fair to ask such a thing of her."

"I understand." Ripley said quietly.

The door opened. Eilonwy stepped through.

"Hello, Madelyn." Eilonwy said brightly. "Are you really leaving today? The girls at the shelter are planning a banquet, you know."

"I'm well aware, but I have been away from my family for too long." Madelyn said primly. "I daresay my husband is getting rather bored of his other wife."

"Yes, I imagine." Eilonwy said. "I certainly am sorry to see you go... I had hoped that you would stay and help rebuild."

"I will return, of course, after I have spent some time with my family." Madelyn said. "Ah... Ripley mentioned having concerns about her ballet training...?"

"Ah." Eilonwy said brightly. "Why don't you take her with you? A little change of scenery would be good for her... and Poppy's training has nearly concluded anyway."

"I can't leave Marley." Ripley said.

"Hm." Eilonwy said, looking at her closely. "Ripley, you're very mature for your age... perhaps you can handle traveling there and back."

Ripley's eyes shone. "You think so?"

"As long as you don't stray." Eilonwy said.

"Excellent." Ripley said. She slid off the side of the bed. "I need to go inform Marley. Excuse me."

She stepped out into the hall.

"She's going to grow into a fine witch." Eilonwy said happily. "The first of many in this city, I think."

"I agree." Madelyn said slowly. "But you need to have words with her about her friendship with the Freeman girl. The last thing we need is to antagonize Soleil Freeman."

Eilonwy shuddered.

"I'm terrified of her." She said. "After what I saw her do... I would hate to make her my enemy." She fingered her hair longingly. "But... I wouldn't mind living with her and her husband."

Madelyn rolled her eyes. "Oh do you?" She said.

"He may consider taking me as his second wife." Eilonwy said happily. "Probably."

"I wouldn't count on it." Madelyn said. "Soleil Freeman is not the sort of woman to tolerate that arrangement."

"You make it work."

"Yes." Madelyn said, a little bit bitter. "By staying away as often as I do..."

They didn't often speak of these things. The Windsor practice of sharing their husbands with other women was generally accepted as a necessity, but most relationships were considered tenuous at best and could end at any time.

"Madelyn." Eilonwy said. "I'm serious about this, you know. You've been married several times, and-"

"And I've outlived all of my husbands." Madelyn said, her voice on edge. "Listen to me, Eilonwy. Being in love... is hard for us. We must serve the master first, just as the men we love must serve their human wives first. Do you understand? Marrying American would be a risk for us... and for you. I daresay pursuing such a thing would destroy everything you have built over the past fifty years. So please... promise me... find someone who isn't married to a woman who very likely could kill us all?"

Eilonwy pursed her lips.

"It can work." She said. "I know it can."

"Then why hasn't he asked you?" Madelyn asked. "Eilonwy... you're not being wise."

Eilonwy deflated.

"I suppose." She said. "It's just... I thought... now that it's all over..."

She shook her head.

"I'll try and control my feelings." She promised, more to herself than to Madelyn. "Be sure to write, you hear? I'll want to keep you updated on everything that's going on here..."

...

Ichiro Takemura walked into his home with a bang.

"Mother, I'm home."

Immediately she was on him.

"You have fallen behind on your studies, my son."

"Yeah... because I was out fighting demons." Ichiro said darkly, as he set Yamato down on her spot next to the door.

"That's no excuse!" She snapped. "Do you think you can fight the Ignis forever? They're dead, Ichiro! Dead!"

"Because I keep killing them, Ma."

"You need to have a real career first! And children!" She snapped.

"Have you forgotten, Ichiro? That we must continue our samurai lineage?"

He closed his eyes, thinking deeply. He wondered how best to break the news that Yuri Love was pregnant with his child.

"I remember."

"Then you must appreciate how important it is for you to further your education." She snapped. "Now...." She turned behind her and reached for the katana on the mantelpiece. She cupped it in her hands and held it out to him.

"If I had chosen to give this katana to you, perhaps you would have succeeded in destroying Ignis yourself." She said stiffly. "I... suppose I made an error in judgement. You still have much to learn, but your ability as a warrior are undeniable."

Ichiro held out the katana and gingerly took it in his hands.

"This is the blade used by our ancestor, Kamura Takemura." She said stiffly. "It was made for a woman... but you rather enjoy playing around with such things."

"Kamura..." Ichiro whispered. Mother Takemura nodded.

"Yes...." She said softly. "When she was felled in battle she lay on death's door. She chose to sell herself to the Ignis in order to keep fighting. Of course... such a thing in samurai culture is shameful. So she was cast out and forced to live among the Ignis Witches."

"We're descended from the Ignis?"

"No." Takemura denied. "Her children were already born when she ascended." She was watching Ichiro very closely.

He gripped the weapon in his hand tightly.

"I fought her..." He said quietly. "And I lost."

"You are no match for a true samurai." Takemura said. "Kamura was a formidable foe even before she became a witch. What is more of concern to me is that you did not realize her true identity, even when you met her in battle. Perhaps if you had been paying attention to my lessons and stories, you would have come to this realization yourself."

Ichiro closed his eyes.

"You must be vigilant." Takemura was saying to him. "You must!"

Ichiro knelt down in front of her.

"I will, Mother." He said formally. "I will not repeat these mistakes!"

...

American gingerly stepped into the bedroom. Poppy glanced up at him cautiously.

"She, uh, doesn't want-"

"Leave us, Poppy." American said heavily. Poppy apologized heavily, and quickly let them be.

"Leave me." Persephone rasped.

"No." American said stubbornly, as he stepped forward to the bed. "I came to see you."

Persephone turned her head. American had to stop himself from flinching. The entire right side of her face had been completely burned away.

"See me?" She asked. "After what happened"

"It was an accident." American said.

"I'll never be able to perform again." Persephone said. "And... I'll look like this forever."

"I'm sure there's something-"

She reached for the vase at her bedside and threw it at his head. He ducked, as it hit the wall behind him and shattered.

"Nothing!" She screeched at him. "Nothing can be done!"

"You'll learn to live with it!" American shouted back.

"Easy for you to say." Persephone sneered. "You have your whole life ahead of you."

She reached forward and pulled the bed curtains back over her.

"Leave me be." She said. "I never want to see you again, do you hear me?"

American stood there for a while.

"Persephone, I'll be here for you no matter-"

BANG

American tilted his head to the side as the bullet whizzed harmlessly past.

"Leave!"

She was crying as American turned around and walked out of the room. Soleil was standing waiting for him. She was leaning against the wall with her arms crossed. She looked angry.

"I want my friends to talk to her." She said. She raised her fists.

"Thunder... and lightning."

American stared at her. She stared back. And then they broke down into giggles.

"You probably should speak to her." American said, as her hand fell on his arm. "You've known her longer than me."

"I have." Soleil said, her voice grave, as she took his arm and led him down the stairs. "But she needs to get over it. Plenty of our friends have suffered at the hands of the Ignis... many lost their lives. To act so selfishly at a time like this... it's appalling."

"She thinks we're only so merry because we haven't suffered."

American said. "But we have. A lot..." He trailed off, noticing the dark

expression on Soleil's face.

"Yes." Soleil said quietly. "Celia, Jameson.... Isobel." She swallowed at the last name. "They gave their lives for us."

American was watching her very closely. "Isobel's death bothered you, didn't it?" He asked. "What happened?"

Soleil did not speak immediately. They stepped out into the first floor and into the room below.

"She lived a hard life." Soleil said quietly. "She suffered more than many of us. A lesser person would have broken under the pressure and became a cold, bitter person. But... she genuinely tried to do the right thing. She made the ultimate sacrifice for... for me. No one's ever done anything like that for me before. I felt... like she deserved redemption."

"I would say she got it." American said quietly. "As brief as it was, she got to enjoy freedom, and your friendship. There was a reason she valued you so highly, Soleil. Only you thought to give her a chance. She really meant it when she told you that she wanted to change."

Soleil nodded. She was about to speak again as they stepped out into the street, but before she could they heard a car door slam.

"No, you idiot." Charlotte Harker was saying. "You left my bag!"

"It's already in the car!" Goneril protested.

"No, that was my traveling case... I need the little red one. Go get it."

"I-"

"Now!"

Goneril dejectedly walked away, past them and into the building. Soleil and American approached her.

"You're leaving, then?" American asked.

"Unfortunately." Charlotte sniffed. "I've delayed long enough... my research has fallen far behind, and Goneril is starting to get ideas

about who she would prey on first... No. We need to return to Grey Arcadia today."

She seemed far more irritable than usual. American had never seen her so ornery, but Soleil knew her well enough to guess at the problem. Whatever her research entailed, it was going badly.

"You won't at least stay for the banquet?" American asked.

"It sounds tempting, really, but I really need to get back to work... and besides, if Goneril attends a banquet she would take it as an invitation to start inviting girls into the back and-"

Goneril stepped back through the door, carrying Charlotte's red bag.

"Excellent." Charlotte said. "Put it in the front, please."

Goneril dutifully placed it in the trunk, and then stepped into the driver's seat.

"You're making her drive?" Soleil asked, alarmed.

"I'm certainly not going to." Charlotte said. "As I've said, I have a lot of work to do... I Intend to work all through the drive back."

She took a step towards Soleil and held out her arms. Soleil didn't move as Charlotte wrapped her arms around her.

"It was good to see you again." She said quietly. "I missed you... come visit once things have settled down for you."

She pulled away and turned to face American.

"Treat her well." She admonished him. "If you don't... You'll have me to answer to."

"You won't have to worry about that." American said. "In fact... why don't you come back for dinner sometime? I'd like to get to know you better."

Charlotte blinked. She looked towards Soleil, who nodded.

"Why." She said. "I'm flattered. "Thank you... That sounds lovely."

She turned to the car door and opened it. She got inside and shut it behind her. She rolled the window down and glanced back at them.

"I think you two will have a very happy life together." She said. "You have my blessing!"

She waved as Goneril took off down the street. They waved goodbye, and turned to look at each other.

"She's nothing like you at all."

"She's not." Soleil agreed. "But she's been there for me all my life... for better or for worse." She paused. "It was she who was there for me the most when my Mother became paralyzed." She admitted. She fell silent, looking embarrassed.

"I still haven't met your Mother." American said gently. "Or the rest of your family."

Soleil shook her head.

"They never wanted me to be a vampire hunter." She confessed.

"They thought I didn't have the talent for it..."

"No talent? You?"

Soleil smiled sheepishly. She tugged on his arm.

"I'm not so great." She confided in him. "I'm bad at magic, I can never be the domestic housewife... by the time our child is born imagine you'll be sick of me-"

"What child?"

She blinked at him, and then her mouth fell open in a wide O.

"Oh no, I forgot to tell you! I'm pregnant."

American stared at her.

"You're going to be a father..." Soleil said. Her cheeks were beginning to turn a bright shade of red. "I... Oh, no... I've blown it, haven't I?"

"No!" American said quickly, as he took her hands. "No... it's wonderful! It's... wow!"

Soleil smiled at him more widely and sincerely than she ever had before. She somehow looked much younger than she usually did, and far more radiant.

"I was trying to wait for the right moment." She said. "So much has been happening I... I could hardly believe it myself. I thought that we could do a formal announcement at the banquet, and then I guess..."

She fell silent as American pulled her close and kissed her.

"Listen to me." He said, when he pulled away from her. "I'm going to give you more kids than you can handle. All of them will grow up to be great vampire hunters, like their Mother. We're going to turn this city into a place where people like that can grow and thrive! This is bigger than me, or you, or Amaris Yew... it's bigger than all of us!"

In that moment, she felt that she would never stop smiling.

End

Thank you all for supporting American Evil. My name is Harman Smith, and I am an independent creator. My goal is to create things that you would never see anywhere else, such as the novel you have just finished.

Did you enjoy it? I hope you did. You can find more content from me on my Youtube channel, Harman Smith. I hope you will enjoy my next novel, *Playing Dirty*, as much as this one.